Image: The Baptism of Clovis (c. 1500), the first king of the Franks (reigned c. A.D. 509-511).

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Religion and the Public Square

In this series for *Catholic Family News*, I have had occasion more than once to speak of the dominant contemporary conception—traceable to the so-called Enlightenment—that religion is a purely private affair, about which we should studiously avoid making waves in the public square. Religion is like a hat or a coat you take it off and hang at the entrance before going into the offices of government or business.

The Christian's vocation cannot be confined or clipped off in that manner. This is not because it is political first and foremost, but rather because it is a total vision of life in all its dimensions, natural and supernatural, and therefore has implications for the whole of the world in which man lives.

When the Gospel entrusted to the Church first entered the world, there was no program or plan for "taking over the State." Because Christ had died for the salvation of sinners, and baptism into His death was the only way to receive the blessing of eternal life, Christians sought not only to follow Christ zealously but also to persuade as many of their fellow citizens to follow "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) as they possibly could. It was love (Greek, *agapē*; Latin, *caritas*) that compelled the Christians to Christianize the world around them—soul by soul, family by family, city by city, people by people. The Middle Ages was not a "Five-Century Plan" that someone implemented; it was the organic result of many generations of clergy, religious, and laity who lived their faith with gusto. Christian citizens transformedthe world by the energetic exercise of moral and theological virtues.

The avowed goal of the Christian is to win souls for Christ; the goal of the Catholic is to make the world Catholic. Impelled by the Spirit of truth and of love, believers must be restless and pained as long as the world around them is *not* Christian in its attitudes and appearance, its desires and deeds—and all the more pained to the degree that it is *opposed* to the mind which is in Christ Jesus (cf. Phil. 2:5). So obviously is it the duty of believers to "re-establish all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10)—the motto and program of Pope St. Pius X, *Instaurare omnia in Christo* (cf. Encyclical *E Supremi*, n. 8)—that even the Second Vatican Council could not avoid reiterating it several

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times, in language that bears the stamp of Leo XIII.

I mention this not because I do not share the severe misgivings about that Council entertained by Archbishop Viganò and Bishop Schneider (among others), but simply to point out that even here, in the very midst of a progressive *coup*, strong echoes of the traditional doctrine still resounded, showing that it can never be repudiated without rejecting the essence of Christianity itself. I am reminded of the fact that even the Thomists and Molinists, who fought bitterly for centuries about grace and predestination, were of utterly one mind about the impossibility of a separation of Church and State. It is *that basic* a conclusion from the givens of the Deposit of Faith.

Instaurare Omnia in Christo

Progress does not consist in separating still further the State from the Church—"equivalent to the separation of human legislation from Christian and divine legislation," as Leo XIII succinctly put it.[1] True progress, for Catholics, occurs when the laity infuse the spirit of the Gospel into temporal realities.[2] The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (that's a mouthful!), *Gaudium et Spes*, exhorts the laity to "impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city."[3] That does not sound like a secularist or liberal viewpoint; instead of privatizing religion, it insists that the truth about God and man, as revealed by God Himself, should be, as the text literally says, "written into" (Latin, *inscribatur*) the civil society here below. Neither Aquinas nor Leo would have said it differently.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, recognizing the "intrinsic value" of temporal realities (§7), notes how easily they can be perverted to the grave harm of mankind, and issues a call to Christians, especially the laity, to *transform* the temporal order according to the Gospel—without, needless to say, aspiring to a simple fusion of temporal and spiritual societies, as has occurred historically in a number of ways: the Caesaropapism of Byzantium, the Erastianism of some Western nation-states, the Gallicanism and Josephinism of the Enlightenment. Modern Christians have tended towards the opposite extreme, the divorcing of personal conviction from public life, which is a perilous attitude ceaselessly opposed by Catholic social teaching.[4]

The conclusion in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* §7 is unequivocal:

> "The whole Church must work vigorously in order that men may become capable of rectifying the distortion of the temporal order and directing it to God through Christ. Pastors must clearly state the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use of temporal things and must offer the moral and spiritual

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> aids by which the temporal order may be renewed in Christ."

The "distortion of the temporal order" is precisely when it is not "direct[ed] to God through Christ." Pastors, too, have the responsibility to provide support to the laity in their efforts to Christianize society and government. The same document defines the "apostolate in the social milieu" as "the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, *laws*, and *structures* of the communityin which one lives" (§13, emphasis added). Catholics are urged to take an active interest in the reconstruction and perfection of civil society according to unchanging principles, so that citizens may be prepared for receiving the Gospel (§14).

Such passages from Vatican II necessarily prompt the question: why did the Council's implementation so rapidly abandon this traditional doctrine? The answer is not far to seek: the Council simultaneously accepted the Liberal separation of Church and State in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Ironically, in light of the fascination with De Lubac's *Surnaturel,* the abandonment in *Dignitatis Humanae* of the truth of the intrinsic ordering of the natural to the supernatural—of the earthly city to the City of God on behalf of which the Catholic Church teaches and sanctifies—made it impossible to work seriously and effectively toward the fulfillment of the principles espoused in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. The relaxed and worldly Liberal policy of the one document won out over the echoes of traditional teaching in the other.

Proper Relationship Between Church and State

Although the Church rejects the *separation* of Church and state, she upholds the *distinction* between the two: they are not the same power, nor are they in the same hands (except in rare cases). Yet they cannot act separately because they operate on the same unitary subject, namely, the individual man who is both a citizen and a Christian, a child of his people and a son of God. In no way has the Church called for a theocracy as an ideal form of government; on the contrary, throughout history the spiritual power, represented by the clergy, has continually had to extricate itself from distracting and burdensome business that was not properly its own.

Practically speaking, the question of Church and State comes down to this: Are the laws and customs of the State, are the cultural practices of the people, supposed to reflect and embody Catholic truth, or not? It is evident that the answer can only be yes. If the Faith is vibrantly and courageously lived, then it is not only possible but likely that a large number of citizens or statesmen will become imbued with the Faith, and this will tend to affect for the better their practical judgments and way of life. If they tried to remain totally "neutral" in their public lives and practiced the Faith only in private, they would play the hypocrite,

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and give the lie to their beliefs. The Catholic politician cannot "leave his faith behind" in his decisions; he must continually view temporal realities from the eternal and divine perspective of his faith.

If we accept St. Thomas's definition of natural law as a participation in the eternal law—that is, in eternal wisdom, the mind of the Creator Himself—then even reason's act of judging "according to natural law" is a way of applying the divine measure to human realities. (As many magisterial texts declare, the Church is the guardian and interpreter of natural law in its purity; without giving ear to her teaching, it would be impossible for a State to follow the natural law consistently and stably.) Failure to do this is not just an incidental failure, it is the *total failure of prudence,* above all, of political prudence. A ruler cannot be a ruler at all, let alone a good one, if he is not seeking always to judge and legislate the affairs of temporal life according to unchanging principles. The Catholic position is simply that such principles *may* and *should* include supernatural principles as well as natural ones.

Catholics reject any understanding of politics that would remove or relativize fixed natural principles by making the will of a dictator *or* the will of a majority the source of right. Fascist Germany, contemporary France, the United States in its liberal drift, are no different in this fundamental way: each has let what is right and wrong be determined by the will of man, whether by electorates or by unchallenged politicians. Far from being "pre-Vatican II," this position is exactly what one finds in John Paul II's encyclical letters *Veritatis Splendor* and *Evangelium Vitae*, although unfortunately the Polish pope loses no opportunity to mix in his liberal views on religious freedom.[5]

This much we should admit: John Paul II was not a simple *secularist*, for no secularist could demand that States and societies make due efforts to preserve and promote man's *integral good*, which transcends the order of material creation and life in this world, as the Polish pope ceaselessly proclaimed against the Siamese twins of dialectical Marxism and materialistic capitalism. He seemed nevertheless unable or unwilling to draw the Leonine conclusion that, since religion—taken in the Thomistic sense of the virtue by which we offer due and right public worship to God—is the first and highest moral virtue, the State has a solemn obligation to promote precisely *this* virtue and its exercise. He was likely caught in the modern confusion between *confessionalism* (politically-recognized subordination of State to Church) and *theocracy* (exact overlap of Church and State), and since he rejected the latter, as did Leo XIII, so he rejected the former.

Moreover, on a pragmatic level, John Paul II, like Pius XII, was too anxious about the incompetence of the modern State to legislate well in regard to the highest conditions of human flourishing. Who could blame him for being skeptical? In a period of decadence and disintegration, there is a lot to be said for the rough-and-ready attitude met with every day

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in the American West: Let me have my gun, livestock, and truck, and leave me and my wife in peace to bring up our children in the fear of the Lord.

A Catholic Vision for Social Life

The Church has always advocated something more than this minimalism as an ideal to be pursued. Catholicism should be *a socially privileged reality.* What would this look like in practice?

Businesses would be closed on Sundays and holy days.[6] Hospitals would be forbidden to perform unethical practices. Doctors and pharmacists could not prescribe or distribute contraceptives. Parliament or congress would open and close with prayer, perhaps led by a chaplain. Proposed legislation could be evaluated by a council of bishops or moral theologians they appointed.[7] Movies would require pre-screening and some kind of "*nihil obstat*" before they could be distributed. The construction of mosques or Mormon temples would be prohibited. These are merely examples, some being more appropriate to nations with a majority Catholic population, while others are pertinent to all.

The State's *minimum* obligation would be to protect "natural religion," in such a way that atheism and all its expressions (e.g., literature arguing for a purely materialistic process of evolution) as well as metaphysical absurdities (e.g., Mormonism; polytheistic pagan religions) could be prohibited *tout court*, with no allowance of their public exercise. For in such errors the intellect is denying first principles, and thus cannot be said to be pursuing truth, but only corrupting itself.

That John Paul II himself would be logically forced to this position is clear from what he taught repeatedly about culture, as in this famous remark: "A faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived." Is not the way a people organize and govern themselves politically an immensely important element of their culture—one that is particularly influential over all other aspects of culture? (It is obvious that people can organize themselves politically in *evil* ways, in anti-Christian ways,[8] as the news shows us every day. Does it not follow that Christians may and must organize themselves in *good* ways, in ways expressly Christian?) Is this not, then, prime missionary territory to be entered and converted? And if this domain is converted, will it not mature into something like Christendom, in the model depicted by St. Thomas Aquinas?[9]

Similarly, in Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania* (2001), John Paul II wrote: "It is vital that the Church *insert herself fully into culture* and from within bring about the process of purification and transformation" (§16). Again: "It is the fundamental call of lay people to *renew the temporal order in all its many elements.* In this way, the Church becomes the

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yeast that leavens the entire loaf of the temporal order" (§43). He rightly complains that "the Christian concept of marriage and the family is being opposed by a new secular, pragmatic and individualistic outlook which has gained standing in the area of legislation" (§45). In other words, the natural and Christian concept of marriage ought to attain, or regain, authoritative standing in the area of legislation. This is something John Paul II consistently demanded, confident that he was asking the State to undertake a task essentially within its competence.

Longing for Christendom

If the popes, bishops, clergy, and faithful of the Dark Ages had decided at one point to give up their quest for a Christian society (you can imagine them sighing and saying to one another: "It's awfully depressing, all these plagues and barbaric tribes and crumbling buildings and seedy politicians. Why don't we just forget all about justice and peace in this world, which is a rotten place anyhow, and flee to the forests with the hermits?"), the Middle Ages, the Age of Faith and Chivalry, of Cathedrals and *Summae,* would never have been born.

Tempted by discouragement in the face of evil, we must learn the same lesson: If we truly love Christ, then we will love and long for Christendom, which is the flowering of His grace in this vale of tears. This means we will do everything we can, *as individuals,*to make this world more welcoming to Christ, to His Church, to His saving Gospel and to its sanctifying power. This will be the only long-term solution to our short-term problem: the want of seriously Catholic statesmen. It is a want that faith, hope, and charity, working against all odds, have inherent power to supply, but not before many grains of wheat have first fallen into the ground and died (cf. Jn. 12:24). "I have planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase. … For we are God's coadjutors [fellow workers] …" (1 Cor. 3:6, 9).

To be continued. See here for Part I, here for Part II, here for Part III, here for Part IV, and here for Part V of this series.

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[1] *Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*, Letter to the Bishops and Faithful of France (1892), §28. See also Leo's encyclical on the Christian Constitution of States, *Immortale Dei* (1885).

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[2] See Thomas Storck's *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order* (Beltsville, MD: Four Faces Press, 1998); idem, *The Catholic Milieu* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom College Press, 1987). These works are available at the website www.thomasstorck.org.

[3] The original text in §43, speaking of the laity: "*Ad ipsorum conscientiam iam apte formatam spectat, ut lex divina in civitatis terrenae vita inscribatur.*"

[4] See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, Nov. 24, 2002.

[5] So much so that the encyclicals immediately generated a predictable reaction from liberals: "John Paul II is turning back the clock to the preconciliar days!"

[6] Something John Paul II expressly calls for in his Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* of May 31, 1998.

[7] Admittedly, we might hesitate about this provision at the present moment, but we should take the long view of things and hope someday to see much better bishops than we now have.

[8] See *Discourse to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture,* 1990.

[9] I have in mind Aquinas's opusculum *On Kingship,* where he argues in favor of a hierarchical society ruled by a Christian prince, himself subject to the Pope and the priests of the Roman Church. Over against this "consecrational Christendom" Jacques Maritain and Charles Journet attempted to articulate what a "secular Christendom" might look like, but I am not convinced they did not create a chimera, a contradiction in terms.

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