Pope Leo XIII & Republicanism: The Church's Struggle in 19th-Century France & the United States

By Phillip Campbell

The late 19th century was a time of political transformation in Europe. The traditional monarchical order of the West had been upended with the French Revolution of 1789 and its ensuing chaos, and though the crowned heads of Europe had been restored at the Congress of Vienna, republican movements continued agitating for revolution throughout the following decades. The upheavals of 1848, the Italian and German unifications, and the emergence of the anti-clerical Third Republic in France continued to alter the structure of Europe's states until, by the late 1800s, the continued existence of monarchy was being openly debated in Europe's intellectual circles.

The Church's initial experience of republicanism was hostile. As republicanism emerged from the zeitgeist of anti-clericalism espoused by the French revolutionaries, the popes of the early 19th century were understandably wary of republicanism; Gregory XVI's 1832 encyclical *Mirari Vos,* for example, equated republicanism with religious indifferentism and moral license while Pius IX—who was once driven out of Rome by republican radicals—quashed all republican movement within the Papal States and condemned the notion that the Church "ought to come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."[i] Gregory XVI and Pius IX equated republicanism with persecution, libertinism, and the guillotine.

By the late 19th century, however, the continued march of republicanism had broadened the discussion. Pope Leo XIII took a more nuanced view than his predecessors, believing that the republican structure of government must be distinguished from the particular principles espoused in a given republic. For Pope Leo, the primary consideration was whether a government respected the Church's rights to carry out its mission. In his 1885 encyclical *Immortale Dei* on the Christian constitution of states, Pope Leo considered the statements of his predecessors and argued that no particular form of government is condemned, so long as the sphere of the Church's activity is not circumscribed. Any governmental structure is workable under the right conditions:

The right to rule is not necessarily, however, bound up with any special mode of government. It may take this or that form, provided only that it be of a nature of the government, rulers must ever bear in mind that God is the paramount ruler of the world…if judged dispassionately, no one of the several forms of government is in itself condemned, inasmuch as none of them contains anything contrary to Catholic doctrine, and all of them

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are capable, if wisely and justly managed, to insure the welfare of the State. Neither is it blameworthy in itself, in any manner, for the people to have a share greater or less, in the government: for at certain times, and under certain laws, such participation may not only be of benefit to the citizens, but may even be of obligation.[ii]

To understand how Leo applied this policy in practice, we will briefly examine his relationships with two particular republics during his long pontificate: France and the United States.



France

Leo XIII held the chair of Peter from 1878 to 1903. During this time France was under the governance of the Third Republic, ushered in following the fall of the Second Empire after

the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The Third Republic had a distinctively anti-clerical orientation, largely due to strong royalist sympathies among the clergy which made them suspect in the eyes of the state. A series of laws throughout the 1880s restricted clerical influence in education and the military, culminating in the Law of Associations (1901), which gave the state authority to liquidate religious orders, resulting in the closure of thousands of Catholic schools, confiscation of assets, and expulsion of religious communities from France. A law of separation of church and state followed in 1905, entirely secularizing French society.

From the outset of his pontificate, Leo believed the reconciliation of the Third Republic with the Church was possible. Leo believed the French government's hostility to Catholicism was predicated upon the mistaken premise that a Catholic could not be a faithful citizen of a republic. This required finesse—Leo needed to protest the particular anti-clerical measures of the Third Republic while affirming the legitimacy of the republican form of government in general. This approach generally focused on the benefits Catholicism could render the Third Republic if allowed to prosper.

In 1880, for example, Pope Leo issued a strongly worded protest to the French government of President Jules Grévy through Cardinal Guibert, Archbishop of Paris, strongly remonstrating against persecution of the religious orders and highlighting all the good they had done for France. The French government countered that the only way the orders could be saved would be if all of France's religious signed a solemn pledge not to formally identify with any political party, nor take part in any political movement. This would, effectively, politically neuter the clergy.

The bishops of France were not opposed to this measure, and after weighing it carefully, Leo concluded it did not violate any principles of Catholic teaching. "It is certain," he wrote on the matter, "that in all things where we do no injustice to others, we should obey those in authority…such being the rules of public conduct enjoined on all Catholics without distinction, there could be no objection to the declaration demanded of the religious orders."[iii]

The result was catastrophic for French Catholics, for in the absence of clerical-led political resistance, the elections of 1885 returned overwhelming majorities of anti-clerical politicians to the French government. Monsignor Bernard Reilly, in his biography of the pope, notes, "Leo XIII has been, and is still, severely blamed by many French Catholics for what they consider his policy of conciliation."[iv] This may be an unfair criticism, as it is doubtful that France's Catholics would have possessed the mettle to band together into the type of compact, nationally organized league that would have been necessary to effectively resist the government's measures. Given the choice between an ineffective resistance bound

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to exacerbate the problem or a conciliatory gesture guaranteed to secure the existence of the orders, Leo opted for the latter. Fortunately, this strategy paid some short-term dividends: the decade after 1885 saw the ebbing of many earlier anti-clerical measures.[v]

One reason French Catholics could not effectively resist the oppressive dictates of the Third Republic is because they were too divided politically. While the republicans maintained a united front, Catholics were divided: there were Legitimists, Orleanists, Bonapartists, as well as a growing band of Catholic republicans, divisions which crippled Catholic resistance to the regime. Aware of this reality, by 1890 Pope Leo no longer considered wholesale Catholic resistance to the republic a feasible approach. This prompted a bold change of strategy, which the pope announced through the mouth of the French Cardinal Bishop Lavigerie at a banquet in Algiers in 1890. Here, Cardinal Lavigerie announced that the Church would henceforth support the Third Republic. The Cardinal said that "sincerest love for our Church, as well as for our country, impels us to declare ourselves loyal supporters of the republican form of government in France…[as] the form of government which the will of the people has distinctly confirmed."[vi] This policy was only slowly adopted by French Catholics, prompting Leo to reaffirm it in his own words in a letter published in the pages of *Figaro* in 1891. Leo's letter is worth quoting at length, as he encourages French Catholics to put away the idea of a Catholic resistance movement in favor of working within the structure of the existing political system:

Yes, Cardinal Lavigerie has nobly spoken; it remains for the French to act nobly…It is for the young men to make a republic with good, simple, and practical laws. What I fear is that in France, political ideas are apt to be merely fashions. All new situations are difficult. It is better to do something that is tolerably good than to support anything that is very bad, for in all regimes there are two sides. If it is possible for you to create anything better than a republic, do so; but if not, enter into the house, and as you shall furnish it, it shall remain…A Catholic party is an excellent dream—but still a dream. Out of a hundred persons there are three good Catholics at the present time. The Catholics should bring in their religion to do good and not to create parties. The Catholics, who, unfortunately, have not enough of the spirit of association for Christian work, have too much of it for political affairs. They should concentrate themselves on questions of education, of labor, the training of children, and the welfare of the wage-earners. These matters would furnish them with plenty of occupation.[vii]

The Archbishop of Paris supported Leo's policy by offering public prayers imploring the blessing of God on the deliberations of the French Parliament in 1890. Leo himself again addressed French Catholics in a stirring letter, titled *Inter gravissimas*, issued in February 1892, firmly arguing that Catholics had a duty to support the French republic. This was a

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bitter pill for royalist Catholics, and as late as 1894, the Catholic Congress at Rheims considered disregarding Leo's direction on this point. Leo's policy prevailed in the end, however. The French government had only to treat Catholics justly to secure their loyalty.[viii]

It is arguable to what degree Leo's policy worked, as two years after Leo's death the state was entirely secularized with the 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State, perhaps the most anti-clerical measure to come out of the Third Republic. For his part, Leo remained undaunted and the pontiff remained committed to the policy adopted in 1890: Catholics could work for their political aims within the existing framework while remaining loyal to the republic which made that framework possible.

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The Third Republic

The United States

Leo's relationship with the United States was considerably more cordial than with France. In August of 1893, *La Civilta Cattolica*—the Roman paper which is commonly deemed the unofficial mouthpiece of the Vatican—published a lengthy commentary on the United States

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and its religious policy that admirably summed up the view of Pope Leo XIII on the American republic. The opening contrast with France is especially noteworthy:

At the time….when France prepared the guillotine for her priests and was about to exterminate from her territory the Catholic religion, the American people opened an asylum for oppressed Catholics of all lands, made them sharers of the political and religious rights of her own citizens, this left the Church free as the sun in his career through the heavens to fulfill upon earth her divine mission. We say, 'left the Church free,' inasmuch as the Constitution of the United States, banishing from the halls of civil legislation, as from an incompetent tribunal, all questions of religion, permits that they be decided by each several religious community, according to its own law and discipline. The framers of the American Constitution never had the foolish pretension of giving, as from their own authority and power, freedom to religion or to the Church—on the contrary, they forbade Congress to meddle in religious matters, or by any act whatsoever to prefer one Church to another…This is the true advantage of the Catholic Church in those States, that there she is, though separated from the State, truly free and in no way hampered by inconvenient of oppressive laws.[ix]

La Civilta Cattolica's commentary certainly applies rose-colored goggles in its consideration of Catholic-American history, but the truth of its assertions isn't so important here; the point is that it encapsulates the attitude of Leo XIII towards the United States of America. Though the Church is separated from the state in the U.S., the relative freedom allowed to the Church to carry out her mission unhindered is a net positive, especially considering the anti-clerical regimes in power in other European states.

The American Church, too, had much to be grateful for in Leo XIII. From 1878 to 1893, the Church saw phenomenal growth—15 new seminaries, 53 new colleges, 1,457 new parish schools, 2,843 new parishes, and a whopping 3,840 new priests ordained under Leo's pontificate.[x] Leo also gave the American Church its first cardinal in John McCloskey, Archbishop of New York, elevated to the cardinalate in 1875.

Leo indeed demonstrated a paternal solicitude over the United States and had a deep interest in all things American (he even once received the famous frontiersman and performer Buffalo Bill Cody in audience in 1890).[xi] It would be tedious to list every gesture of good will the pontiff lavished upon the United States, but his care is best attested in his encyclical *Longinqua*, which Leo published in January 1895 and addressed to the hierarchy in the United States. Here Leo reaffirms the teaching quoted in the *La Civilta Cattolica* piece, but with some important caveats:

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[T]hanks are due to the equity of the laws which obtain in America and to the customs of the well-ordered Republic. For the Church amongst you, unopposed by the Constitution and government of your nation, fettered by no hostile legislation, protected against violence by the common laws and the impartiality of the tribunals, is free to live and act without hindrance. Yet, though all this is true, it would be very erroneous to draw the conclusion that in America is to be sought the type of the most desirable status of the Church, or that it would be universally lawful or expedient for State and Church to be, as in America, dissevered and divorced. The fact that Catholicity with you is in good condition, nay, is even enjoying a prosperous growth, is by all means to be attributed to the fecundity with which God has endowed His Church, in virtue of which unless men or circumstances interfere, she spontaneously expands and propagates herself; but she would bring forth more abundant fruits if, in addition to liberty, she enjoyed the favor of the laws and the patronage of the public authority.[xii]

In other words, the fact that the Church has flourished under the American system of separation of Church and state does not mean this system is ideal. Because of the divine fecundity of the Church, we should expect it to flourish in *any* political environment that was not overtly hostile. If the American Church has grown with no state support, Leo asks us to consider how much more fruit it could yield with public patronage. The nature of the American republic was superior to that of, say, France, but its relative superiority should not be misconstrued as an absolute superiority.

This admonition presages the Americanist controversy, which was about to erupt the following year with the publication of the French translation of a biography of American Paulist priest, Fr. Isaac Hecker, culminating in Leo's 1899 encyclical *Testem Benevolentiae*, condemning the tenets of "Americanism," the notion that the active virtues should be preferred to the contemplative. Americanism turned out to be somewhat of a bugbear, however, with the American hierarchy steadfastly denying that American Catholics held any of the principles spelled out in the encyclical, and concord was restored.

The Americanism controversy proved to be but a minor hiccup in Leo's relationship with the American republic. Indeed, throughout his pontificate he displayed nothing but admiration for the United States—not only its church, but its people and government. On the occasion of Pope Leo's golden jubilee in 1887, President Grover Cleveland presented the pope with a handsomely bound copy of the United States Constitution, delivered by the hand of Msgr. Denis O'Connell, President of the American College of Rome. O'Connell's then asked for a blessing for the United States; his words have been preserved:

We beg you, then, Holy Father, to bless the young Republic, which has achieved so much in a single century; bless the land discovered by your saintly compatriot, Columbus; bless the

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wise and manly President of the United States.[xiii]

Leo was deeply touched by the gesture and responded in kind, professing a unique love for the United States:

I have received offerings from all parts of the world—from Italy, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, England, and one from the President of the United States—a most pleasing one. As Archbishop there you enjoy perfect freedom. That freedom, we admit, is highly beneficial to the spread of religion. As the head of the Church I owe my duty, love, and solicitude to every part of the Church, but toward America I bear especial love. My respect for your nation is great. Your government is free, your future full of hope. Your President commands my highest admiration.[xiv]

Though it is not part of Leo's official teaching—and though it does not pertain to the American republic as such—we cannot fail to mention an interesting anecdote from Leo's deathbed. As Leo lay dying in July of 1903, he passed in and out of lucidity, sometimes uttering reminiscences or observations that were noted by his attendants. One of these utterances reveals Leo XIII's last words on the United States: "The Americans have always showed me more affection than any other people. I love them."[xv] His last words on France have been preserved as well, evidencing a more strained relationship. To Cardinal Mathieu, Archbishop of Toulouse, who had come to console Leo on his deathbed, the pontiff said, "I greet France. She has caused me much pain but has also given me much consolation and joy."[xvi]

If France was a republic whose republican machinery could be wielded against the Church, in the United States Pope Leo saw a republic whose institutions could work in the Church's favor. We will note, however, the measured approach of the pontiff in both cases: the anti-clericalism of the French republic did not dissuade Leo from encouraging French Catholics to support it, and the relatively pro-Catholic system of the United States did not prevent Leo from admonishing Americans that their system was not the highest possible. In all things, Leo measured the worth of the two republics against the support each lent to the Church's divine mission.

At the end of the day, a republic was simply another form of government, one of many that had come and gone over the long course of mankind's sojourn on this earth. If any government is willing to accord people their basic human rights and guarantee the Church's liberty, such a government could be a friend to the Catholic religion. Pope Leo's policy can thus be summed up admirably in the words of Christ from the Gospel, "He who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).

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Much of the information in this article can be found in the book *The Life of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII by* Richard Clarke, first published in 1903, newly reprinted by Cruachan Hill Press.

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"He had found one pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46)

The Program of Christ Against the Plans of Satan – Part Two

Editor's note: On March 1 and 2, 2025, we hope to see many of you our faithful readers in Florida for our conference on the global struggle between Christ and satan. Father Denis Fahey's writings are replete with a description of the great plan of Christ for true social order and a diagnosis of the devil's plans to undermine it. Our conference will examine all six aspects of Christ's plan as explained by Father Fahey in works such as The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World. Father Fahey summarized these points in the following article. We hope reading it will prepare you to participate in our conference.

Widespread Ownership of Private Property

The Divine Plan for order calls for wide diffusion of ownership of property, in order to facilitate families in procuring the sufficiency of material goods required for the virtuous life of their members as human persons, and for unions of owners and workers in guilds or corporations, reflecting the solidarity of the Mystical Body in economic organization.

"The law therefore should favor ownership, *and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners.*"[1]

"As in the conflict of interests and most of all in the struggle against unjust forces, a man's virtue does not always suffice to assure him his daily bread, and as the social machinery ought to be so organized as by its natural action to paralyze the efforts of the wicked, and to render accessible to every man of goodwill his legitimate share of temporal happiness, We

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The 2025 March *Catholic Family News* Florida Conference will focus on Father Fahey's plan

Taking Sides: The New Personnel of the Francis Pontificate

By Murray Rundus

"Personnel is policy." Traditionalists are all too familiar with this quote, especially in the Francis Pontificate, and for good reason. The heart of the traditionalist message is profoundly realist as it recognizes that ideas only become tangible when brought into being by an agent, someone who acts. The traditionalist message does not confine its critiques to hypotheticals or interpretations of documents. Rather, it rests on a sharp critique of what the Church and State are here and now with clear precedents in mind as to what they should return to. Our adversaries also understand this, they are not interested in simply making Church teaching ambiguous so that they can merely speculate about their heterodox ideas in academic circles. No, instead the Progressivists seek to make their vision of Catholicism an undeniable reality, one that confronts our senses, asserts itself in law, and commands with authority. We still hear the dying gasps of the 'Reform of the Reform' and 'Hermeneutic of Continuity' movements speaking with their messages that the Post-Conciliar Church ***can*** be reconciled with Tradition, or that it ***might*** be in continuity with the past. This message is infinitely weaker than the firm statement that it ***is*** not, followed up by an implementation of the 'New Pentecost' at Vatican II which makes this fact undeniable. This is the context and vision with which we must view the new personnel decisions of the Francis Pontificate.

Much of Church media exploded in a storm concerning the appointment of Cardinal Robert McElroy to the Episcopal See of Washington DC, and the coinciding forced resignation of Bishop Dominique-Rey in the southern French diocese of Fréjus-Toulon. The narrative concerning Cardinal McElroy was that this was Pope Francis' counter to President Trump's immigration agenda, as Cardinal McElroy has been very pro-migrant in the past. The corresponding narrative concerning Bishop Dominique-Rey was that he was sacked for his allowance of the Traditional

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Cardinal Robert McElroy, left, Sr. Simona Brambilla, right

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[i] Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, 17-19; *Syllabus of Errors*, 80. See also Emiliana P. Noether, "Roman Republic," *Encyclopedia of 1848 Revolutions*, available online at https://sites.ohio.edu/chastain/rz/romanrep.htm

[ii] Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei* 4, 36

[iii] Richard Clarke, *The Life of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII* (Cruachan Hill Press: Grass Lake, MI., 2024), 281-282

[iv] Msgr. Bernard Reilly, *Life of Leo XIII* (John C. Winston Co: Philadelphia, 1887), 511-512

[v] Their ebbing, but not their extinction. Anti-clericalism would be revived after the Dreyfus Affair (1894-1906) culminating in the secularization law of 1905.

[vi] Clarke, 454

[vii] Ibid., 456

[viii] Ibid., 454

[ix] *La Civilta Cattolica*, August 1893, in Clarke, p. 336

[x] Ibid., 339

[xi] "Wild West in Rome: 'Buffalo Bill,' His Indians and Cowboys, Received by Leo XIII," *The Galignani's Messenger*, Mar. 4, 1890. McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, MS6.3777.073.01 (Rome), accessed from https://codyarchive.org/texts/wfc.nsp11879.html

[xii] Leo XIII, *Longinqua*, 6

[xiii] Clarke, 389

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid., 561

[xvi] Ibid., 560

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