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DEMOCRACY AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: CONTINUITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND CHALLENGE

My topic is the relationship between two phenomena that have been of long-standing interest to Jude Dougherty as scholar and public intellectual.¹ They came together rather dramatically during the main years of his career, the time he served as dean of the School of Philosophy at the Catholic University of America. The University's birth certificate, as it were, was the 1889 encyclical *Magni nobis*, promulgated by Leo XIII ten years after *Aeterni patris*, which initiated the Thomistic revival, and two years before *Rerum novarum* began the modern tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. The founding of the university and, in 1895 its School of Philosophy, was of a piece with Leo's initiation of a confident address to the modern world in the wake of the political and social turbulence unleashed by the French Revolution. Leo's project was one of vigorous intellectual engagement in which philosophy had an important role to play. No subsequent pontiff embodied this more than St. John Paul II, who had visited Catholic University at Dean Dougherty's invitation as the cardinal-archbishop of Krakow and then again as pope, a pope identified not only with the principles of the Gospel, but as a champion of both reason and political freedom. His papacy represented the culmination of a process by which the Church's social teaching assessed with increasing nuance the character of democratic politics, moving from a diffidence rooted in the

¹ See especially the essays collected in *Western Creed, Western Identity: Essays in Legal and Social Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000); and "The Fragility of Democracy," in *Die fragile Demokratie—The Fragility of Democracy*, ed. Anton Rauscher (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007), 13–27.

disorder of the post-revolutionary age, through a confrontation with totalitarian ideologies that rejected both the transcendence of God's authority and popular government, and finally to not merely acceptance of democracy, but a kind of preference for it as the form of government that—rightly understood and established—fits best with integral human development as conceived by the tradition of Catholic social doctrine.

In the first part of my paper, I discuss the origins and meaning of democracy relative to the development of Christian political thought through the modern period; it is important here that democracy means something different in the ancient world than it does in the modern. In the second part I discuss the view of democracy proposed in the formative period of modern Catholic Social doctrine, especially from the pontificate of Leo XIII to the Second Vatican Council. The third part treats what seems to me the apogee of Catholic thinking about democracy, that is, in the political thought of St. John Paul II. In the fourth part I want to talk about some remaining tensions and problems related to democracy that are articulated partly also in John Paul II's thought, but in a sharper way in the thought of Pope Emeritus Benedict and one quite prominent challenge to the Catholic view of democracy in the phenomenon of pluralism. One can see in this history that the Church has gradually come to appreciate democracy not simply as an acceptable form of government, one that is not intrinsically at odds with Christianity, but in a positive sense, as an opportunity for human beings to achieve a level of moral development not available in other regimes. But there remain challenges associated with democracy to government and social life consistent with the natural moral law and to Christian faith.

I

Democracy means first and foremost a form of government. The Gospel, however, says nothing about forms of government. It says very little at all about politics. Jesus enjoins us to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's (Mk, 12:17), a crucial text to be sure, since it establishes the distinction between the spiritual and temporal orders. Similarly important, although somewhat more in need of interpretation, is St. Paul's statement, "Let every soul be subject to higher powers: for there is no power but from God, and those that are ordained of God" (Rm, 13:1). But neither of these statements tells us anything about what form this power might or should take. Christian political

thought was worked out by theologians largely through the adaptation of pagan political philosophy to the Gospel in the particular conditions they faced.

Democracy was an invention of the classical Greeks; it means literally “rule of the people.”² We need to note two things about this original, classical understanding of democracy. It was, at once, both more democratic and less democratic than we think of a democracy today.³ It was more democratic in the sense that it was direct government by the people. The main legislative body for the city was the Assembly, which was made up of all the citizens and which directly voted on the most important matters.⁴ In Athens during the fourth century before Christ the assembly met in the open air about 40 times a year, every week and a half or so, and its meetings began with a herald asking, “Who wishes to speak?”⁵ Any citizen could then address the meeting and votes were taken by show of hands. The city also needed officials to carry out the Assembly’s orders and administer aspects of city life. These officials were not elected, however, because election is not really democratic. That may seem odd to us, but an Athenian of the fourth century before Christ would ask: for whom does one vote in an election? Usually one votes for the person she takes to be the “best” candidate. This is really aristocratic, however, since aristocracy is rule by the best. The presupposition of democracy is equality and if one really believes in equality, the equality of citizens with respect to political things, then one must fill offices in a way that recognizes this equality. You must fill them by lot and this is what the Greeks did. Basically they drew names out of a hat (they used potsherds).⁶ We still do this with one political office, that of juror, and for the same reason: the task of a jury is to determine the facts as related to the defendant’s guilt or innocence and we hold that with respect to determining the facts in a trial any adult citizen is as well qualified as any other, and so the judgment of any randomly selected twelve (or whatever the number) jurors carries the day. This is democracy in its pure form.

But Greek democracy was also less democratic than modern democracy in an important respect: all the citizens participated directly in politi-

² See Thucydides, 2.37.1, 6.39.

³ The best modern account of Athenian democracy is Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275a22–34, 1317b28–29.

⁵ Demosthenes, 18.170.

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1298b13–26.

cal decisions, but only about ten per cent of the people who lived in a city counted as citizens. Women were excluded as were the quarter or so of the city's population made up of slaves. Still, the number of citizens who were entitled to vote in fourth-century Athens was probably about 30,000 and there was a quorum in the Assembly of 6,000.⁷ Now if we wanted to do this today, it would be quite difficult, and the difficulty is part of the reason representative democracy developed in the early modern period, but there were other reasons why some thinkers, even in the ancient world, did not think highly of democracy, and this leads to the second thing we need to note about classical Greek democracy.

Aristotle classified the different forms of government or "regimes" (*politeia*) in the third book of his *Politics*. He made his classification along two axes: the number of rulers—one, a few, or many; and their end in ruling—the common good (true regimes) or the good of the rulers themselves (perverted regimes). This yields three true regimes: monarchy, aristocracy, and a generic regime, that is, one with no name of its own; and three perverted regimes: tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy.⁸ Now two quite striking things emerge from this classification immediately. First, and, to us, the shocking view that democracy is among the perverted regimes; and second, that its good equivalent has no proper name of its own because it does not have the kind of distinctive character of the others, but is a fusion of two of the perverted regimes, democracy and oligarchy.⁹ Democracy is a perverted regime because it is the rule of the many for their own goods and Aristotle thinks this regime often undermines its own existence, since the many, who are the poor, expropriate the goods of the few wealthy, which creates disloyalty among the latter group, but also destroys the economy.¹⁰ The correlate good regime, the generic regime, is a fusion of democracy and oligarchy and thus of rule by the poor and the rich, since those two groups always exist and always have different interests. It is also crucially influenced by the presence of a middle class and adheres to the rule of law. The best chance for a stable and decent government is to achieve a compromise between the few rich and the many poor under these conditions.

⁷ See Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, 90–94.

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a22–b11.

⁹ *Id.*, 1293b33–34; 1294a15–17, 22–23; 1307a7–9.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 1281a11–24, 1318a21–26.

These aspects of classical democracy led many thinkers to harshly criticize, if not reject it (Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle). But this rejection of democracy continued even into the modern period, even in the United States. Most of the American founders were not advocates of democracy precisely because what they knew of it they knew from ancient history. They carefully distinguished democracy, direct rule by the people, from republic, rule by representatives of the people. They saw democracy as impractical for reasons of size, but also because they thought democratic regimes were dangerously unstable. James Madison famously wrote in the tenth *Federalist*:

A pure democracy can admit no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will be felt by a majority, and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party. Hence it is, that democracies have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have, in general, been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.¹¹

Madison also thought the country would be better served by representatives who were themselves distinguished by prudence and superior judgment, thus rejecting the strict conception of political equality held by ancient democrats.¹² So it is that we have come to a very different conception of democracy, one in which the few rule putatively in the interest of the many, who, every few years, have the opportunity to turn them out of office.¹³

The form of government or regime was the central concern of classical Greek political thought. It was not so important to Christian political thinkers. This was due first and foremost to the fact that the moral horizon of human affairs now definitely transcended the boundaries of the city. The stakes of politics could no longer be as high as they were for the pagans. 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 was partly because some Christians expected the immanent return

¹¹ Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 61, n. 10.

¹² *Id.*, 62.

¹³ For a characteristic contemporary defense of (a version of) this notion of democracy see Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

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; there would be 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ He was in some of his political views influenced by Cicero and some of 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 (1225–1274).

Aquinas nodded to the idea of regimes occasionally and held in the most important passage discussing the idea that a mixed regime with elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy blended (as he claims it was in the government of Biblical Israel).¹⁶ But he was always more concerned with the issue of the legitimacy of political power itself and the moral parameters of its use. This concern was also evident in the later medieval and renaissance thinkers who were followers of Aquinas. The medieval Catholic thinkers distinguished three different ways in which authority made its way from God to political life.¹⁷ One was the theory of divine right, but in another way this was not at all a medieval Catholic view of politics because the only leader who they generally held to have been chosen this way was the very first pope, appointed by Christ Himself. The two real options were what came to be called “designation” theory and “transmission” theory. Designation theory held that political power came directly from God, but that the community could, by some mechanism, designate who would hold it. While some thinkers held that the designation theory

¹⁴ See V. B. Lewis, “Eusebius of Caesarea’s Un-Platonic Political Theology,” forthcoming in *Polis*.

¹⁵ See, e.g., *On the City of God*, 1.8, 4.33, 5.17, 15.22, 20.2.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 105, 1c.

¹⁷ See Heinrich Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought* (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1950), ch. 19.

described the origin of political power, the theory better explains the papacy after Peter and so it is perhaps unsurprising that the most important later Thomists (e.g., Cajetan, Suarez, Bellarmine) tended to support the transmission theory, which held that power passed from God to the community and thence to political officials according to the community's determination, which implied a kind of natural democracy, since the community could transfer political authority wholly, partially, or—at least in theory—not at all. It would be going too far to call this a positive theory of democracy, but it was no simple rejection of democracy and could be used to formulate a specifically Thomistic account of democracy, as it eventually was.¹⁸

But this was a later development. During much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century the Church seemed strongly opposed to democracy. The context of all this is very important. A great deal of the Church's view of democracy was related to the events during and immediately following the French Revolution that broke out in 1789. The revolutionary regime there clashed with the Church very early on and, while some historians of the Revolution, like Alexis de Tocqueville, argued that the Church was not itself the original object of revolutionary anger, it did become the target of harsh persecution, perhaps largely because of its close association with pre-revolutionary royal absolutism. In 1790 the revolutionaries promulgated the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which made all priests employees of the state and required them to swear an oath of loyalty to the new regime. In September of 1792 hundreds of Catholic priests were massacred in Paris; the next year, following the execution of the king, the Reign of Terror was unleashed, again, partly against the Church. In 1798 Pope Pius VI was arrested by Napoleon's troops and was forced into exile. His successor, Pius VII, returned to Rome and negotiated a treaty with Napoleon in 1801, only to be arrested himself in 1809. After the Revolutions of 1848 Pius IX had to flee for a time, and this led to his increasingly negative attitude towards all things modern culminating in his 1864 "Syllabus of Errors." In 1870 Germany was unified by Bismark, who then launched his Kulturkampf against the Church. That same year the unification of Italy, animated by a harshly anti-clerical nationalism, led to the abolition of the Papal States.

¹⁸ See especially Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 158–178.

It was in this hostile environment that many Catholic thinkers rejected democracy. The counter-revolutionary thinkers of the nineteenth century like Joseph De Maistre, Juan Donoso Cortés, and Louis de Bonald all defended a throne and altar political theory. They shared something else that is important in seeing why the Church's view seemed to change in the twentieth century. They made their arguments from the perspective of a kind of sacred history and not on the basis of philosophy. Unlike Cajetan, Suarez, or Bellarmine, they were not Thomists.¹⁹ This changed with the pontificate of Leo XIII, who initiated both the modern tradition of Catholic social teaching and the revival of Thomistic philosophy in the Church. It is not often enough noted that these two initiatives were intimately related with one another.

II

Leo XIII was the first pope not to enter on his papacy as a temporal ruler in over a thousand years. The abolition of the Papal States in 1870 presented challenges that led him to invent the modern papacy. He made himself a kind of global public intellectual and his long pontificate was devoted mainly to teaching through the vehicle of over eighty encyclicals.²⁰ In his second, *Aeterni Patris (On Christian Philosophy, 1879)*, he called for a revival of Thomistic philosophy as a basis for Catholic education, but also for vigorous engagement with the non-Catholic world. Leo saw the travails of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as rooted in bad philosophy and he thought the only adequate answer could be grounded in good philosophy. He had absorbed Thomism in the early days of the Thomist revival that began in Italy²¹ when he was a seminary student and made it the centerpiece of his efforts at educational reform in Perugia, where he served as archbishop. He continued his efforts as pope on a far vaster scale.

Leo's papal writings manifested his intense concern with political and social issues. About Leo's efforts here two things deserve particular

¹⁹ Bossuet's *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture Sainte* (published posthumously in 1709), a chief target of enlightenment critics and inspiration for later counter-revolutionaries, never cites Aquinas.

²⁰ See Russell Hittinger, "Pope Leo XIII," in *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 39–48.

²¹ See Gerald A. McCool, S.J., *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 17–58.

notice: first, his teaching on politics is thoroughly grounded in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas, so it is an explicit attempt to apply classical political ideas to the modern environment. Second, however, Leo never completely abandoned some of the Church's characteristically less transferable ideas about political authority, especially the more immediate sense in which it was thought to participate in divine authority à la *Romans* 13. So, for example, in a single paragraph (no. 3) of his 1885 encyclical letter, *Immortale Dei* (*On the Christian Constitution of States*), Leo both emphasized the Aristotelian thesis that man is by nature a social and political animal and held that the only true foundation of political authority was rooted directly in the authority of God, citing in support *Romans* 13:1.²² Similarly he devoted part of the encyclical to reaffirming the necessity of states to recognize true religion.²³

With respect to democracy, the most important element of Leo's teaching was his many statements that the Church neither endorsed nor condemned any particular form of government, which left open the possibility—a possibility that many Catholic thinkers had treated as unthinkable earlier—that democracy was a legitimate option.²⁴ This idea was strengthened in Leo's 1892 encyclical on Church and State in France (*Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*), in which he repeated the freedom of states to adopt any form of government provided that it was directed to the common good and then explicitly approved Catholic participation in the politics of France's republican regime.²⁵ In a 1901 encyclical on the Christian Democracy movement, *Graves de Communi Re*, however, Leo combined his neutrality between forms of government with a judgment that Christians should not aim to change the existing form. He distinguished genuine Christian democracy, which emphasized work to benefit the lower classes of society from socialism and any doctrine endorsing class struggle and revolution.²⁶ There were, then, limits to Leo's embrace of modernity.

²² *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 18 (1885): 163.

²³ *Id.*, nos. 6 and 14, pp. 163, 166–67. See also *Libertas* (*On the Nature of Human Liberty*, 20 June 1888), no. 21, A.S.S. 20 (1887): 604–605.

²⁴ See *Diuturnum* (*On the Origins of Civil Power*, 29 June 1881), no. 7, A.S.S. 14 (1881): 5; *Immortale Dei*, nos. 4, 36, 48, pp. 162, 174, 179; *Libertas*, nos. 12, 44, pp. 600, 613; and *Sapientiae Christianae* (*On Christians as Citizens*, 10 January 1890), no. 28, A.S.S. 22 (1889–1890): 396.

²⁵ *Au milieu des sollicitudes* (*On the Church and State in France*, 16 February 1892), no. 14, A.S.S. 24 (1891–1892): 523.

²⁶ See *Graves in Communi Re* (*On Christian Democracy*, 18 January 1901), nos. 5, 7, 9, A.S.S. 33 (1900–1901): 387.

Those limits can be seen in sometimes rather negative statements about democracy. However, read in context, the criticisms are consistent with his tacit approval of democracy. In 1878 Leo condemned the view that public authority derives from the will of the people.²⁷ The view was expressed again in later encyclicals.²⁸ What Leo objected to was the notion that majority opinion is the basis and legitimating principle of political authority. He held to the Romans 13 view that authority had its source in God, acknowledging that popular participation in government was not itself wrong and that the people could designate the person or persons to exercise the authority that came ultimately from God.²⁹ This was not a ringing endorsement of democracy, but neither was it a condemnation of democracy as such. Leo seems to have taken a cautious and narrow view of democracy as a procedure for choosing public officials that allowed for the participation of citizens and that could be taken as consistent with the view that political authority itself was a participation in divine authority, the legitimacy of which was certified by adherence to the natural law itself. His apparent condemnation of democracy, then, was in fact nothing more than a condemnation of moral relativism, or the false view that morality was reducible to majority opinion, and it could just as well apply to monarchy if the monarch overstepped his authority by violating the natural moral law.

Pius XI repeated Leo's principle that the Church had no favored political regime.³⁰ He also repeated the thesis that authority came from God and condemned again the view that its source was the will of the majority.³¹ In this respect, however, Pius XI's most important legacy may be his establishment of the Feast of Christ the King in his 1925 encyclical letter, *Quas primas*. The feast recognized Christ's real and not merely metaphorical status of king, a power that extends to all matters and all people and obligates both individuals and communities to render true worship.³² The

²⁷ *Quod apostolici muneris* (On Socialism, 28 December 1878), no. 2, A.S.S. 11 (1878): 373.

²⁸ *Diuturnum*, nos. 6, 11, pp. 4–5, 11; *Immortale Dei*, nos. 24, 31, 35, pp. 170, 171–72, 174; *Libertas*, nos. 15–16, p. 601.

²⁹ See especially *Diuturnum*, no. 6, pp. 4–5.

³⁰ *Ubi arcano Dei consilio* (On the Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ, 23 December 1922), no. 12, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 14 (1922): 678; *Quadragesimo anno* (On Reconstructing the Social Order, 15 May 1931), no. 28, A.A.S. 23 (1931): 683.

³¹ *Ubi arcano Dei consilio*, no. 29, p. 683.

³² *Quas primas* (On the Feast of Christ the King, 11 December 1925), nos. 17–18, A.A.S. 17 (1925): 600–601.

kingship of Christ, however, does not entail monarchy as an earthly regime: Pius held that Christ's kingship was the source of political authority for princes *and* magistrates "duly selected" (*legitime delectis*),³³ thus tacitly accepting the possibility of democratic government by leaving open the means of selection. Again, the thrust of his statement is that authority itself has its basis in God's authority and the natural law and must be exercised within those limits.

The tacit acceptance of democracy was increasingly acknowledged between the two world wars as the Church reacted to the rise of increasingly virulent political ideologies. The culmination of this movement was Pius XII's 1944 Christmas Message, which, while not explicitly endorsing democracy, laid down criteria by which one could distinguish true democracy from false and destructive versions, thus implying that "true" democracy was an acceptable possibility.³⁴ In particular he distinguished in a strikingly Tocquevillian manner between the people as a body of citizens and simply a mass: the former is characterized by a variegated structure including secondary associations and a consciousness of rights and duties; the latter is an undifferentiated multitude open to manipulation by demagogues.³⁵ He also held that a "healthy democracy" (*sana democrazia*) must be based on the principles of the natural law and of true religion.³⁶ During and after the Second World War Catholic political philosophers like Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon were publishing books that offered explicitly Thomist interpretations and defenses of democracy as the form of government that, when properly constituted, best ensured the protection of human dignity and the promotion of the common good.³⁷ This movement was more publicly embraced by St. John XXIII, who affirmed the source

³³ *Id.*, no. 19, p. 602.

³⁴ A.A.S. 37 (28 January 1945): 12. While Pius is often quoted as describing democracy in this speech as a "postulate of nature imposed by reason itself," he actually qualified the formulation as an expression of what "appears to many" (*apparisce a molti*, *id.*, 13). It is altogether possible that he did himself think this, but he held back from pronouncing it in his own name, probably because of the often repeated neutrality of the Church with respect to forms of government in themselves, which he himself repeated in the same speech (*id.*, 12).

³⁵ *Id.*, 13–14.

³⁶ *Id.*, 17.

³⁷ See especially Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), and *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*; and discussion in John P. Hittinger, *Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), especially 35–60.

of authority in God in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, but then hastened to add that this teaching in no way precluded democracy,³⁸ indeed, he also held that participation in public affairs, to the degree that the country's level of development allowed, was a human right.³⁹ This point about participation was subsequently endorsed by the Second Vatican Council⁴⁰ and Pope Paul VI.⁴¹

The principle of participation, endorsed also by John Paul II,⁴² marks a real development, but one consistent with important principles articulated during the "pre-democratic" era, that is, it in no way contradicts the idea that authority ultimately comes from God, whether we take this as some direct or indirect form of transmission or as an implication of the eternal and thus the natural law. What seemed a great hostility to democracy, then, was rooted in the Church's reaction to the violence and social disorder that followed the French Revolution and the century of political upheaval that succeeded. During that time a slow reconsideration proceeded of how permanent principles of morality could be applied to political life as it continued to develop in the twentieth century. The culmination of this process was the pontificate of St. John Paul II.

III

John Paul II's unique personal history and philosophical formation led him to focus on democracy in a way no previous pope had done.⁴³ In his most important social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), he reaffirmed the teaching that the Church privileged no one regime,⁴⁴ but then came very close to an endorsement of democracy. He made it clear that the most important test of any political regime was its ability to protect human

³⁸ *Pacem in terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty, 20 April 1963), no. 52, A.A.S. 55 (1963): 271.

³⁹ *Id.*, nos. 26, 73–74, pp. 263, 278–279.

⁴⁰ See *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 7 December 1965), Arts. 31, 75, and cf. 68.

⁴¹ *Octogesima adveniens* (Apostolic Letter, 14 May 1971), nos. 24, 47, A.A.S. 63 (1971): 418, 435–437.

⁴² *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (For the Twentieth Anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, 30 December 1987), no. 44, A.A.S. 80 (1988): 576–577.

⁴³ See George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), chs. 1–4.

⁴⁴ *Centesimus annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, 1 May 1991), no. 47, A.A.S. 83 (1991): 852.

dignity,⁴⁵ but also that human dignity was rooted in man's living in both freedom and truth, which for him are always connected.⁴⁶ Democracy, therefore, is understood along three dimensions: first, the participation of citizens in political decision-making; second, elections and the consequent accountability to the voters of political officials; and third, the notion that democracy is more likely to pursue the common good as distinct from the good of the rulers only.⁴⁷

What John Paul called "authentic democracy" (the phrase evoked and the encyclical frequently cited Pius XII's 1944 Christmas message) rested on a number of conditions:

Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the "subjectivity" of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.⁴⁸

By the subjectivity of society, John Paul meant a free civil society that afforded a widespread opportunity for participation in the goods only available to persons through cooperation. In a crucial sense, this referred to the same reality technically called subsidiarity, the necessary pluralism of social life that allows for the fulfillment of potentialities latent in human nature. Relativism is rejected precisely as a false view of morality that also

⁴⁵ Id., nos 3, 11, pp. 795–796, 807.

⁴⁶ Id., no. 4 and cf. 11, 27, 46, 61, pp. 797, 807, 826, 851, 866.

⁴⁷ Id., no. 46, p. 850.

⁴⁸ Id.

undermines democracy, since it evacuates democracy's moral basis. Truth is ultimately independent of any social or political institutions or popular decisions, a point reinforced later. The moral basis of democracy included the protection of human rights (the presence of the rule of law is crucial here), which include the right to life, the rights of the family, the freedom of education and thought, the freedom to work, and most importantly of all, religious freedom, itself rooted in the connection between freedom and truth.⁴⁹ Religious freedom is the most important freedom because it implicates the very dignity of the human person rooted in her supernatural destiny.

These conditions are themselves constitutive of "coherent vision of the common good." This is "not simply the sum of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and rights of the person."⁵⁰ This all seems to go further than previous popes in an important sense. As noted earlier, some of the groundwork for these developments was prepared by earlier Thomist philosophers, especially those who wrote about democracy during and immediately after the Second World War. Most famously, Jacques Maritain argued that the development of democracy was a fruit of the Gospel itself and its unfolding in history. Maritain endorsed a kind of progressive account of history tied to divine providence. If pursued by Christian nations, constantly purified by the spirit of the Gospel, democracy would promote the full development of human personality in justice and charity aimed towards the realization of a fraternal community, an almost eschatological culmination.⁵¹ By contrast, Maritain's former student and close friend, Yves Simon saw democracy as a way to prevent the exploitation of the ruled by their rulers; he rejected what he considered overly optimistic or romantic views of democracy in favor of a hard-headed sense of democracy as the institutionalization of the people's right of resistance against

⁴⁹ Id., no. 47, pp. 851–852.

⁵⁰ Id., no. 47, p. 852.

⁵¹ Maritain began this train of thought before the war. See especially *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; orig. pub 1936), 236–240, 255–268, 280, 304f.; *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 87, 95, 131; *Christianity and Democracy*, 21–34; *Man and the State*, 61, 111, cf. 204–209.

tyranny. That is, he embraced what one might consider a moderately negative view of democracy.⁵²

What is suggested, although not fully developed, by John Paul II is a view of democracy that is neither as positive as that of Maritain, but still essentially positive, as against Simon's more negative view, a kind of middle road between these two great Thomists. He wrote, "The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices."⁵³ This isn't simply a check on tyranny or bad government. Nor is it the sort of naively optimistic view of democracy rejected by Simon (and embraced by Maritain?). To unpack it is to see that in a certain very realistic sense, one not seen by Aristotle or any of the ancients, nor by the medieval thinkers in any explicit way, that democracy (in its distinctly modern form) can be considered not just a regime, but in some sense, the best regime. This is not because the existence of democratic political institutions automatically guarantees good government; it certainly does not. But the successful operation of democracy indicates something, something perhaps dimly perceived by some of the modern philosophers who inspired the revolution against which Leo XIII was responding in the development of Catholic social teaching. Jean-Jacques Rousseau himself wrote that democracy was a form of government suitable only to "gods or the children of gods," but that in all actual human societies it would be impossible.⁵⁴ Now, by democracy Rousseau meant much more the day-to-day administration of government meant by the ancients, not representative democracy, but I think we can see what he was driving at.

The very notion of self-government must assume a certain level of moral development, of virtue and prudence among citizens. Only among a people that achieves a high degree of education, a populace in whom the cardinal virtues of courage, moderation, justice, and prudence, are widely cultivated, can democracy really succeed. Self-government means precisely that: the government by the people of themselves in both their personal lives and in the common life of the political community. Democratic thinking has always been susceptible to a high degree of utopian exaggeration, in the case of Maritain, one might even suggest, of political millennialism, albeit of a relatively mild sort. It was just this against which Simon

⁵² See especially *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 72–103.

⁵³ *Centesimus annus*, no. 46, p. 850.

⁵⁴ *Du Contrat social*, bk. 3, ch. 4, *Oeuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), 3: 406.

reacted in his more realist view. What John Paul II seems to have suggested, however, was that the advocates of democracy must expect a very high degree of moral achievement if democracy is really to work and that in a successful democracy one would expect to see a very great realization of the potentialities in human nature for excellence. One might, from this perspective, affirm (a revised version of) Rousseau's judgment: democracy is a regime fit for the children of God, provided that phrase be interpreted in an explicitly Christian sense to mean that those adopted children of God who have cultivated the moral and theological virtues are best fitted of all for self-government.

This view seems to contradict that of the ancients that I discussed above, but that is not simply the case. Here is a brief, but fascinating section of Aristotle's *Politics* that suggests something similar.⁵⁵ In the third book of that work Aristotle famously discusses the question whether the virtues of the good man are the same as those of the excellent citizen. His answer is that this is only the case in the best political regime. In most cities the rulers are those who have cultivated the virtues most fully and so it remains for the citizens to obey. At the same time, the claim for monarchy is precisely that the king is so manifestly superior in virtue to the people that it would be unjust for anyone else to rule. If the citizen body is largely equal with respect to virtue it would be unjust for them not to share in ruling. If one takes seriously the emphasis on social and economic development in Papal statements, especially since St. John XXIII, one can see a connection to democracy as well. Democracy is the political analogue to development precisely because it is only natural and just for those who have achieved a certain level of education—both moral and intellectual—to participate in public affairs. Moreover, this would not only be for the sake of their own continuing development as persons, but for the sake of the common good since the sort of manifest superiority that could justify monarchy (or aristocracy) would be less common. Democracy requires a high degree of moral and intellectual development,⁵⁶ but also, once such a level has been achieved, it is difficult to justify any other regime.

⁵⁵ Aristotle *Politics*, bk. 3, ch. 10–16.

⁵⁶ This is the core of the now common half-truth that democracy is very difficult to sustain in any community that has not achieved a certain per capita gross domestic product, usually thought to be around \$15,000. For a sophisticated account (in that it considers development as much more than GDP) of the idea see Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Just this view of democracy seems implied by two later encyclical letters of John Paul II. In his 1993 letter on moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, the pope mounted a powerful defense of the traditional Thomist teaching that certain human acts are morally wrong not only relative to their ends or circumstances, but in their very objects. The fundamental norms of morality bind not only individuals but society as well, and not one type of political regime, but all of them:

[O]nly by obedience to universal moral norms does man find full confirmation of his personal uniqueness and the possibility of authentic moral growth. For this very reason, this service is also directed to *all mankind*: it is not only for individuals but also for the community, for society as such. These norms in fact represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy, which can come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties. *When it is a matter of the moral norms prohibiting intrinsic evil, there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone.* It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the “poorest of the poor” on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal.⁵⁷

In one sense this idea is very democratic: all are bound by the same morality, no matter how high their station. But in another way, it is a limit on democracy. No act that is immoral is any less immoral because it is the result of democratic political procedures or the decision of democratically-elected political officials. The whole notion of *raison d'État* is here sweepingly rejected for democracy just as much as for monarchy.

Similarly, John Paul wrote in his 1995 encyclical on life issues, *Evangelium vitae*, about the role of public opinion in the culture of democratic polities. “Democracy cannot,” he wrote, “be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality.” Democracy is fundamentally a “system” and, therefore, a “means and not an end.” He went on to write,

⁵⁷ *Veritatis splendor* (On Some Questions of the Fundamental Moral Doctrine of the Church, 6 August 1993), no. 96, A.A.S. 85 (1993): 1209.

Its “moral” value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs. If today we see an almost universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy, this is to be considered a positive “sign of the times,” as the Church’s Magisterium has frequently noted. But the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the “common goods” as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored.⁵⁸

The reference to the “signs of the times” points back to *Gaudium et Spes* and thus, again, an indication that democracy represents an authentic moral development and that one can prefer it as indicative of a level of excellence and human development that is itself a goal towards which all should work.

The very foundation of such moral excellence, however, is the natural law, and the natural law is not the result of a majority vote, nor does it change with changes in public opinion. The civil law of any political regime is evaluated by reference to the natural law and this is just as true in democracies as in any other form of government and an unjust law is no less unjust for having been enacted by a democratic majority, even a very large one. At the very moment, then, that the Church in some sense embraces democracy not simply as an acceptable form of government, but as one to be preferred, the superiority of the natural moral law as a limit on all political action is also reaffirmed, and this in a particularly strong way given the tendency of democracy to hallow public opinion with a degree of moral legitimacy never enjoyed by earlier, often quite defectively just, political regimes. This aspect of democracy presents a particular kind of moral challenge, one particularly emphasized by Benedict XVI.

IV

The question of the place of democracy in Catholic social teaching for Benedict XVI is perhaps best understood in light of a phrase made

⁵⁸ *Evangelium vitae* (On the Inviolable Good of Human Life, 25 March 1995), no. 70, A.A.S. 87 (1995): 482.

famous by and closely associated with the pope emeritus, “the dictatorship of relativism.”⁵⁹ Benedict shared with John Paul II a pre-eminent concern for the protection of human dignity. For Benedict the greatest threats to that dignity are to be seen first, in the possibilities presented by modern science and technology divorced from the constraints of moral reasoning, and second, in political processes divorced from that same reasoning. In the first case he saw the possibility of a kind of dictatorship of technical reasoning that could lead to manipulation and oppression; in the second the famous dictatorship of relativism, which could, of course, also lead to the first. For Benedict the very heart of authentic democracy was the protection of human rights, themselves a part of the natural moral law. Without a consciousness of the moral law, democracy cannot be sustained and degenerates into the dictatorship of relativism or what Tocqueville famously called the “tyranny of the majority.”⁶⁰

These themes all find expression in Benedict’s social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. Democracy is less a theme of that document than a kind of assumption, that is, it is treated as something all peoples desire; in the first of these places he refers to “true” democracy and the test of this is of much greater concern to him. So he repeatedly emphasizes the necessity for political institutions to be directed to the common good, for them to follow the natural moral law, and to protect fundamental human rights.⁶¹ He also points again to the paradoxical sense in which democratic mores can, by embracing the theory that public opinion determines truth, undermine human rights. The only sure guarantee here is found in a conception of freedom as tied integrally to truth, a point frequently made by John Paul II as well. This was also a key point of the very controversial 2006 Regensburg Lecture⁶² as well as in a number of Benedict’s other important public speeches, for example his 2008 address to the United Nations General Assembly⁶³ and his 2011 speech before the German Bundestag.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ The statement was made by then-Cardinal Ratzinger in his homily at the mass celebrated at the beginning of the conclave that elected him pope. See A.A.S. 92 (2005): 5–9. He had expressed similar thoughts a number in earlier writings, e.g., *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 27, 49, 53–72.

⁶⁰ *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1, pt. 2, ch. 7, in Tocqueville, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992), 2: 287–300.

⁶¹ See *Caritas in veritate* (On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, 29 June 2009), nos. 41, 73, A.A.S. 101 (2009): 676–677, 704–705.

⁶² A.A.S. 98 (2006): 728–739.

⁶³ A.A.S. 100 (2008): 331–338.

⁶⁴ A.A.S. 103 (2011): 663–669.

Here one confronts the ubiquitous objection from pluralism: this insistence on the accompaniment of democracy by a natural moral law that also constrains it, many reject on the grounds of the pluralism of modern societies. It is a large problem that cannot be adequately dealt with quickly; I would like mainly to suggest a few distinctions and precisions that are helpful in thinking about the question. This is needful because pluralism can mean a number of different things. At one level pluralism can refer to the many different kinds of social bodies or forms of association within the most comprehensive community, usually known as the political. Social pluralism has been a recognized topic in Catholic social teaching at least since the time of Leo XIII and its roots go back very far indeed and they must because there are always at least three different but basic forms of human community: the family, the Church, and the political community.⁶⁵ Pluralism at this level is always present, but problematic only to the extent that the various forms of community must be made to relate to one another appropriately, in ways that follow the natural moral law.

Pluralism, however, can also refer to a pluralism of goods or values and this in two different senses. It can mean that there are a number of different goods or values that can explain human action, that is, a number of distinct ends that people pursue and that cannot be reduced to one another or anything more primitive (except, perhaps to God). So friendship and knowledge are goods that can explain a person's actions, i.e., one acts for the sake of one or the other and the statement of that end is enough to fully explain the act; nothing more need be said. There can be tension between the different goods; one pursues one and not another, but this needn't imply any irreducible or unavoidable rivalry between them. But choices are choices and if one pursues one good that means one cannot necessarily pursue another or pursue others to the same extent. One can be a philosopher or an artist, but rarely both. This kind of pluralism is simply the recognition that there are many goods and that one must make choices. However, one can push things further as some philosophers have done (the most well-known is the late Isaiah Berlin) and argue that there is necessarily a conflict among goods and that what pluralism really means is that there can be no really true morality, no natural moral law.⁶⁶ One cannot

⁶⁵ See Russell Hittinger, "Reasons for Civil Society," in *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 265–283.

⁶⁶ See especially Berlin's "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 11–19.

pursue some goods without acting against others both individually and as a society. This suggests that the very coherence and integrity of human affairs is radically limited and that one's most important choices and commitments are ultimately arbitrary. There is no squaring this view with the classical or Christian view of things; it is at the heart of a certain kind of contemporary liberalism. It is different from both the social pluralism I began with and from the first kind of moderate value pluralism mentioned. Sometimes, when contemporary people cite pluralism as an argument against the account of democracy I have been discussing, this is what they mean.

But they can, and, I would say, usually do, mean something a bit different. Usually pluralism means a kind of disagreement among people about religious or moral truths. People disagree about abortion, same-sex marriage, capital punishment, the morality of drug use, etc. The disagreements are themselves rooted in deeper disagreements about religion, the nature of morality, human nature, or metaphysics. I think the implications of this are pretty clear: people disagree. At one time there was less disagreement on the most important truths of morality; now there is much more. Pluralism in this sense is a matter of fact, like the weather—there is no getting round it and so we must live with it. Some philosophers have gone beyond this to make of pluralism a kind of value in itself, something to be celebrated and promoted, not regretted, within society, even to argue that people should internalize pluralism, become pluralistic in their own souls. Walter Cardinal Kasper has helpfully distinguished between “empirical” pluralism and “ideological” pluralism.⁶⁷ The former is the matter of fact about disagreement in society; the latter sees pluralism as a value to be celebrated and promoted.

Empirical pluralism does seem to me to be regrettable: surely it would be better if people agreed on the most important moral questions and about the most important truths of religion. Pluralism means not only disagreement, but widespread error, and to embrace it puts one dangerously close to indifference about the truth, the very problem that concerned the popes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading them to express reservations about democracy. The fact of empirical pluralism precludes society from doing certain things, for example, establishing an

⁶⁷ Walter Cardinal Kasper, “The Church and Contemporary Pluralism,” in *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 178–179, 185. The lecture was originally delivered at the Catholic University of America in 2002, where I heard it.

official church or even affirming the good of religion and effectively regulating certain kinds of conduct. There are ways that societies face the challenge of pluralism, practices of toleration like the granting of exemptions and conscientious objector status to some laws. These are all matters of political prudence and they must be made by political officials and voters in democratic regimes acting to promote the common good, including the protection of fundamental human rights.⁶⁸ Ideological pluralism is something else again. It converts a regrettable necessity into something praiseworthy, even heroic on some views.⁶⁹ This is an error and it is ultimately unsustainable, not least because the universal internalization of pluralism would have as an effect the elimination of pluralism. Beyond that, and before it swallowed itself, it would result (and it has resulted) in an enormous amount of unhappiness and moral damage to persons and societies.

V

The recent history of Catholic social teaching, therefore, issues in the following general view of democracy. Human beings associate with one another in view of common goods, including the good associated with the comprehensive form of society that we call political. The common goods and the common good are real goods for persons and related to their direction to the ultimate supernatural good that is the ultimate basis of human dignity. As John Paul II made clear, the very root of Catholic social teaching is the protection of this dignity. Democracy is a form of government that, when soundly established and practiced (e.g., recognizing the integrity of other non-political human associations, limited by the rule of law), in conformity with the natural moral law, is uniquely suited to the development of human personality because it affords citizens the opportunity to develop and exercise their natural capacities for deliberative judgment. The essential context for all this is a recognition that this deliberation is carried out on the basis of the goods, virtues, and rules that form the

⁶⁸ I have discussed some of these questions at greater length in “Natural Right and the Problem of Public Reason,” in *Natural Moral Law and Contemporary Society*, ed. Holger Zaborowski (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 195–234; and “Religious Freedom, the Good of Religion, and the Common Good: The Challenges of Pluralism, Privilege, and the Contraceptive Services Mandate,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 2 (2013): 25–49.

⁶⁹ E.g., Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), especially 234–240.

natural because rational horizon of human action or, one might say, that are the self-evident truths that make self-government a human possibility.

At the same time, democracy requires genuine development to have already reached a certain point and its continued health requires the protection of human dignity via the full panoply of human rights and duties. This is not merely a matter of immunities from certain kinds of coercion—as important as those are—but also the preservation of what is sometimes referred to as the community’s moral ecology, including things like responsibility in the acquisition and use of wealth, the maintenance of an adequate civic education, standards of public discourse, and the culture of marriage. There are also important structural limits on democracy like the rule of law, often now sorely strained by activist courts intervening in the political process in ways that are neither democratic nor in conformity with the natural law. In this sense the Church’s embrace of democracy during the pontificate of St. John Paul II can also be seen as a challenge to the practice of democracy in the contemporary world, one formulated with particular acuteness by both John Paul and Pope Emeritus Benedict. Any appreciation of the justifications for and the possibilities of democratic government must necessarily be accompanied by an awareness of its fragility, a topic about which Jude Dougherty has been teaching us for many years, and only one reason for our gratitude for his wisdom and example.⁷⁰

DEMOCRACY AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: CONTINUITY, DEVELOPMENT, AND CHALLENGE

SUMMARY

The first part of the paper discusses the origins and meaning of democracy relative to the development of Christian political thought through the modern period; it is important here that democracy means something different in the ancient world than it does in the modern. The second part discusses the view of democracy proposed in the formative period of modern Catholic social doctrine in especially from the pontificate of Leo XIII to the Second Vatican Council. The third part analyzes the political thought of St. John Paul II which seems to be the apogee of Catholic thinking about democracy. The fourth part discusses some remaining tensions and problems related to democracy that are articulated partly also in John Paul II’s thought, but in a sharper way in the thought of Pope Benedict XVI and one quite prominent challenge to the Catholic view of democracy in the phenomenon of pluralism. One can see in this history that the Church has gradually come to appreciate democracy

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Robert Sokolowski for helpful comments and criticism.

not simply as an acceptable form of government, one that is not intrinsically at odds with Christianity, but in a positive sense, as an opportunity for human beings to achieve a level of moral development not available in other regimes. But there remain challenges associated with democracy to government and social life consistent with the natural moral law and to Christian faith.

KEYWORDS: democracy, government, politics, natural law, Christianity, Leo XIII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI.