



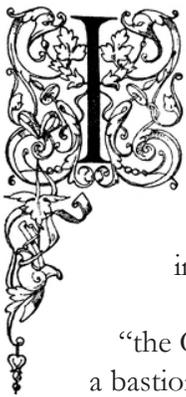
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LIBERALISM, DEMOCRATIC CAPITALISM, AND THE CATHOLIC HUMAN RIGHTS REVOLUTION

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IN HIS WRITINGS ON *CENTESIMUS ANNUS*, MICHAEL NOVAK HAS STRESSED THE impact of the American experiment in ordered liberty on both the teaching of the encyclical and the broader development of Catholic social doctrine of which it is a part. He is quite correct, I think, in doing so. Nevertheless, if it is true that the Church's social teaching has learned from the American experience, it is also true that this teaching contains some important lessons for contemporary America. To adequately understand just what these lessons are, we must first situate *Centesimus Annus* in its proper historical context.

To begin with, *Centesimus Annus* must be read in the context of what George Weigel has termed “the Catholic human rights revolution,”¹ namely, “the transformation of the Roman Catholic Church from a bastion of the *ancien regime* into perhaps the world's foremost institutional defender of human rights.”² This encyclical must be seen as the latest chapter in this revolution. To what John Courtney Murray described as the “political commitment, however discreet, to constitutional government”³ - a preferential option, as it were, for constitutional democracy - which crystallized in the social teaching of Vatican II, *Centesimus Annus* now adds an economic commitment to the market economy, to a regime of economic freedom.

Secondly, *Centesimus Annus* must be seen against the backdrop of the triumph of what Novak terms “democratic capitalism” over the forces of state socialism. While the encyclical embraces the idea of economic freedom as an element of a rightly ordered society, its enthusiasm for the apparent triumph of democratic capitalism is not unequivocal. Why? The answer is to be found in the fact that democratic capitalism itself does not possess an unequivocal meaning: there are a number of different models of democratic capitalism, which although similar in their broad outlines and institutional frameworks differ dramatically in both spirit and substance. These differences, in turn, are the product of a deeper disagreement: they are rooted in divergent understandings of politics and disparate conceptions of the nature and destiny of man.

When translated into practice, these models issue in dramatically different consequences. Here we see the reason for the caution with which *Centesimus Annus* approaches the contemporary ascendancy of democratic capitalism: In the view of the Church, the mere establishment of the institutions and mechanisms of democratic capitalism does not in itself guarantee a social order consistent with the demands of the dignity of the human dignity, which, for it, is the standard by which social, political and economic systems must be judged. What ends these institutions and mechanisms serve, whether or not they advance the cause of the dignity of the human person, will depend upon the way in which these institutions are conceived and the spirit in which they are employed. Not all versions of democratic capitalism, in short, are consistent with the Catholic understanding of man and society.

Thirdly, the encyclical must be read in the context of the Church's long standing rejection of the understanding of man and society informing the liberal individualist tradition in political theory. In the last century, as is well

known, the Church bitterly denounced liberalism. Not only were the individualism, subjectivism and naturalism which lay at the heart of liberalism incompatible with the Catholic conception of the nature and destiny of man, but in practice liberalism issued in the exclusion of the Church from, and the imposition of a secularist ethos upon, the public life of the community.

Some have professed to see in the Catholic human rights revolution a long-overdue reconsideration on the part of the Church of its long standing opposition to liberal individualism. Today, it is suggested, that the Church has recognized that if the particular form liberalism took on the European continent in the nineteenth century is unacceptable from a Catholic perspective, there are other forms of liberalism which are indeed compatible with the Catholic view of man and society. In this view, the development of Catholic social doctrine we are discussing constitutes a belated embrace of the Anglo-American liberal tradition.

To see the inherent incompatibility of Anglo-American liberalism and Catholic social doctrine one need merely examine the variety of liberalism which today informs American life. At its heart is found the idea that, as John Rawls puts it, the self is prior to the ends it chooses. Man, in this view, is essentially a sovereign will. Thus human beings are, in Michael Sandel's words, "free and independent selves, unclaimed by moral ties antecedent to choice."⁴

From this idea of man, its proponents draw a host of conclusions essential to any understanding of the contemporary American mind. First, a radical individualism: all social institutions and relations must be understood as nothing more than the purely conventional products of free choice on the part of naturally autonomous individuals. Social relations are conceived as something artificial, external and contractual, rather than being rooted in man's nature as a social being. Secondly, a thorough-going subjectivism: the liberal individualist theory of man culminates in what Stanley Brubaker terms a "dogmatic doubt that we can ever know what is good for man and woman or that there even is such a thing as the human good."⁵ Thirdly, the elevation, in the absence of a substantive theory of the good life, of individual autonomy, individual choice, to the status of the highest good. It issues in what Francis Canavan has described as "a steady choice of individual freedom over any other human or social good that conflicts with it, an

unrelenting subordination of all allegedly objective goods to the subjective good of individual choice."⁶ Fourthly, that the protection of autonomy of the individual demands the construction of an economic and political order that will be neutral on what Dworkin terms "the question of the good life."⁷ Even when its proponents advocate a large, activist interventionist government charged with creating a more egalitarian economic order, they do so in the name of securing for each of the individuals who comprise the society an equal opportunity to live the lifestyle of his or her choice. Finally, on the privatization of religion, the systematic exclusion of religion and religiously-based values from public life. It results, in other words, in the construction of what Neuhaus has termed "the naked public square."⁸

What needs to be stressed, however, is that the variety of liberal individualism we have just sketched cannot be dismissed as an aberration. Rather, it is the inevitable and inescapable consequence of the very premises which are the foundation of the liberal tradition. From its very inception in the seventeenth century, liberalism was a highly individualistic doctrine taking its bearings from the individual conceived of as a sovereign will. The full implications of this individualism, however, were not immediately apparent. As John H. Hallowell has shown, its implications were initially obscured by the belief, inherited by early liberals such as Locke, from the medieval Christian tradition, in the existence of an objective moral order discoverable by reason which transcended the subjective imperative of the individual will.⁹

Over time, however, liberalism's faith in the ability of reason to ascertain such an objective moral law waned, and the radical implications of its commitment to the autonomy of the individual gradually became obvious. The ultimate result was the emergence of the variety of liberalism we see in America today, a liberalism whose moral core is found in its commitment to a doctrine which George F. Will has termed "the moral equality of appetites."¹⁰

The waning of liberalism's confidence in the ability of reason to discern an objective moral order was no accident. Liberalism, as Roberto Mangabeira Unger has reminded us, was never merely a theory of politics; it was also a philosophy, "a metaphysical system."¹¹ Thus, if liberalism's true nature is to be understood, it "must be seen all of a piece, not just as a set of doctrines about the distribution of power and wealth but as a metaphysi-

cs and epistemology - the nominalism and rationalism - which have informed it from its inception.

Seen in this light, today's liberalism of the sovereign self is revealed as the inevitable end product of liberalism's own internal dynamic; and, far from being an aberration, reveals to us the pure undiluted essence of liberalism. That the liberal understanding of man and society is, in the final analysis, incompatible with the Catholic understanding would appear so obvious as to require no further comment.

Finally, *Centesimus Annus* must be read against the background of the cultural crisis besetting contemporary America: over the past few decades a palpable moral and spiritual vacuum at the center of American life which has left in its wake a corrosive individualism, a widespread moral relativism, a soulless hedonism, a shallow materialism, and a pervasive pursuit of immediate gratification. One thinks immediately here of Bloom's portrait of American life; his characterization of our emergent cultural ethos as nihilism American style.¹² More and more, we appear to be free-falling in a moral vacuum, approaching what the late Will Herberg once described as "a non-moral, normless culture."¹³ To an increasing number of Americans the very idea of an objective moral order transcending their subjective desires lies beyond their range of experience. The social consequences of this new ethos are immense. It has issued in not only a wholesale unraveling of the social fabric - the most dramatic sign of which is the disintegration of the American family - but, even more ominously, a dramatic loss of our sense of the sacredness of human life. Thus, we witness the widespread acceptance of abortion-on-demand and a gradual slide towards the acceptance of euthanasia.

Both in *Centesimus Annus* and elsewhere John Paul II has both lamented this cultural crisis and pointed out that its emergence is no accident: it is a direct result of the inadequate conception of man and society which lies at the heart of contemporary American life. This cultural crisis, this is to say, is closely related to the ascendancy of liberal individualism.

It is obvious that both contemporary American culture and the view of man on which it is predicated, are, quite simply unacceptable from a Catholic perspective. The culture of nihilism bred by liberal individualism, however, ought to be a matter of grave concern, not merely to Catholics, but to all friends of freedom. Whe-

ther it assumes the form of a "gentle" nihilism "of least resistance to the trend of the moment" or a "gruesome" nihilism of "the Nazi sort," nihilism, as George Weigel has recently and forcefully reminded us, "is incompatible with an experiment in democratic republicanism." A free and humane society presupposes a culture of "civic virtue grounded in transcendent moral norms."¹⁴ The individualism and subjectivism bred by liberalism erodes both the belief in the sacredness of the human person which provides the moral and spiritual substance of a free society and the virtues - the ethos of self-restraint, initiative, public spiritedness - whose presence is a precondition of its proper functioning. Our problem and peril today is thus this: we have enshrined as the basis of our public life - as the foundation of the economic and political system. whose triumph we celebrate - an ethic, liberal individualism, which is not only incompatible with the Catholic understanding of man and society but which subverts the culture on which a free society depends. We clearly need a new and better model of a free society, rooted in a richer theory of man and society than that given us by liberal individualism.



It is in this light, I believe, that we can perceive the significance of *Centesimus Annus* and the broader development of Catholic social doctrine of which it is a part. The promise of the Catholic human rights revolution is found in its ability to supply us with the new and better philosophy of the free society we need.

Here I can do no more than sketch the broadest outlines of the understanding of man and society which would inform this model. Its starting point is the idea of a divinely created and therefore intelligible universe, and thus the idea of, in Canavan's words, "a universal human nature, whose natural tendencies and needs are knowable to the human mind."¹⁵ This conception of human nature issues in several conclusions. In opposition to the individualism of the liberal tradition, it sees man as a social and political being by nature rather than choice. Human beings, by their innermost nature are a social and political creature because they require social and political life if they are to realize themselves, to live truly human lives. Likewise, in opposition to the subjectivism of liberal individualism, the Catholic tradition affirms, again in Canavan's words, that "our common nature as created

by God” is the source of “obligatory norms of human action.”¹⁶

Politics, in this view, is about more than creating a framework of peace within which individuals can pursue their own self-interest. Rather, it has as its objective the creation of conditions within which human beings can lead a truly human life. Politics is thus a moral enterprise with a moral objective; law has the function of directing man towards a life of virtue.

A human being, however, is more than an individual specimen of the human species. Created in “the image of God,” a human being is a person, a being who, as Vatican II formulates it, is “endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility.”¹⁷ The person, therefore, as Murray writes, “is a subject ... called to realize the sense of his own existence through a lifelong process of self-determination, motivated by his own personal judgements.”¹⁸ He is called upon to cooperate with God in his creation by confronting “the demands of a transcendent order of truth and goodness”¹⁹ and a universe of persons. This life-long process of self-realization must of its nature proceed freely: The human person’s dignity, as *Gaudium et Spes* affirms, “requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint.”²⁰

It is this conception of the dignity of the human person, and the exigencies which issue from it, that constitutes the starting point of the political theory of the Catholic human rights revolution. “Man’s native condition as a moral subject,” writes Murray:

who confronts the demands of a transcendent order of truth and goodness, requires that he be surrounded by a zone or sphere of freedom within which he may take upon himself his ineluctable burden - that of responsibility for his own existence.²¹

Coercion in matters pertaining directly to the human spirit is not only an affront to human dignity, but practically useless. For, as Murray observes, it seeks to replace the irreplaceable “moral worth attached only to human acts done freely and deliberately.”²² On the one hand, therefore, constitutional limitations must be placed on the scope of governmental authority, especially in matters relating directly to the human spirit. On the oth-

er hand, inasmuch as, in the phrase of John XXIII, “there is nothing human about a society welded together by force,”²³ freedom is elevated to the status of, in Murray’s apt phrase, “the political method par excellence,”²⁴ the political method of choice. In the concise formulation of *Dignitatis Humanae*: “Freedom [must] be respected as far as possible, and curtailed only when and in so far as necessary.”²⁵ Obviously, the principle of subsidiarity figures centrally in this context.

How would a society animated by this philosophy approach economics? As *Centesimus Annus* makes abundantly clear, a society rooted in the philosophy just sketched would by no means reject “democratic capitalism” per se. To begin with, it would see the free market as a useful tool for the promotion of economic prosperity. More fundamentally, in keeping with its commitment to the maxim “as much freedom as possible, as much government as necessary,” such a society would possess an inherent bias in favor of economic freedom.

At the same time, the type of democratic capitalism embraced by *Centesimus Annus* differs in spirit and substance from those types which emerge under the auspices of liberal individualism. It would be characterized by a recognition of the ethical dimensions of political and economic life, and the social nature of man, lacking in the latter. The basic error of the forms of democratic capitalism issuing from liberal individualism is found in their failure to appreciate that, in Will’s words, “choosing an economic system or choosing to substantially revise economic policies is a political, which means moral, undertaking. It is the authoritative assignment of values, the encouragement of some behavior and values and the discouragement of others.”²⁶ By virtue of their insistence on “neutrality,” models of democratic capitalism rooted in liberalism detach economic mechanisms from the broader objective which social life should serve, namely, the integral development of the human person. In doing so, as Canavan observes, they subtly transform, “economic productivity and efficiency ...[into] ends in themselves.”²⁷

Such systems moreover, their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, are hardly “neutral”: they are grounded in a particular vision of man (one thinks here of the *homoeconomicus* of classical economics); sustained by a particular set of political, cultural and economic arrangements; and shape the people living within them and their social arrangement in a predictable direction, fos-

tering an individualism and a utilitarian mindset. What John Paul II terms consumerism, and the ways in which contemporary government policies and private sector economic practices have undermined family life, come to mind in this context.

A democratic capitalism animated by the Catholic understanding of man and society would insist that the mechanisms and processes of the free market be placed in a legal and cultural framework designed to direct their operations to moral and social ends which transcend the impersonal machinations of the market. It would insist, in other words, on the subordination of the operations of the market to the end of the integral development of the human person. A human person, it would contend, is more than a unit of economic production and consumption; and the market must be made to serve man, not man the market. Such a model of democratic capitalism, for example, would almost certainly include economic policies designed to foster family life and encourage a sense of community.²⁸

“It seems to be a tragic law of human history,” Murray remarked, “that every invention that man devises as a means towards his own liberation tends in the end to become a means of his enslavement.”²⁹ There is no reason why democratic capitalism should be exempt from the operation of this law: while capable of being a powerful instrument of human liberation, it can also be the source of new forms of servitude. It would indeed be tragic if the triumph of democratic capitalism over communism were to issue in the latter result.

To prevent the operation of this law, we must first, Murray suggested, understand its cause which is found in our tendency to transform our creations into idols. “It is,” he observes, “the fate of those who worship idols ... [to become] enslaved to that which they worship.”³⁰ By offering us the prospect of a model of democratic capitalism capable of resisting the temptation to transform the free market into an idol, *Centesimus Annus* can help assure that the triumph of democratic capitalism will be a true victory for authentic human freedom.



NOTES

1George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 84.

2George Weigel, “Catholicism and Democracy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 12 (Autumn 1985): 5.

3John Courtney Murray, S.J., “The Issue of Church and State at Vatican Council II,” *Theological Studies* 27 (December 1966): 599.

4Michael J. Sandel, “Freedom of Conscience or Freedom of Choice” in *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace*, edited by James Davison Hunter and O.S. Guinness (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), 76.

5Stanley C. Brubaker, “Tribe and the Transformation of American Constitutional Law,” *Benchmark* IV (Spring 1990): 122.

6Francis Canavan, S.J., “The Pluralist Game,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 44 (Spring 1981): 34.

7Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 191.

8See Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 89.

9See John H. Hallowell, *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1943).

10George F. Will, *Statecraft As Soulcraft* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 158.

11Roberta Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 6.

12See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984). “Nihilism, American Style” is the title of part two of this work.

13Will Herberg, “What is the Moral Crisis of Our Time?” *Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 1986): 9. This essay was reprinted from the January-February 1968 issue of this journal.

14Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy*, 194.

- 15Francis Canavan, S.J., “The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom as a Human Right,” in *Religious Liberty: An End and Beginning*, edited by John Courtney Murray, S.J. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 71.
- 16Francis Canavan, S.J., “The Popes and the Economy,” *First Things* 16 (October 1991): 38.
- 17*Dignitatis Humanae* in *Religious Liberty*, art. 2, pp. 167-168.
- 18John Courtney Murray, S.J., “The Declaration on Religious Liberty: A Moment in Its Legislative History” in *Religious Liberty*, 38.
- 19Ibid., 39.
- 20*Gaudium et Spes* in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1975), art. 17, p. 917.
- 21Murray, “The Declaration on Religious Liberty,” 39.
- 22Ibid.
- 23John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* in *The Encyclicals and Other Messages of John XXIII* (Washington, D.C.: TPS Press, 1964), 335.
- 24This phrase is found in the notes Murray attached to the text of the *Declaration in Religious Liberty*, 173, fn. 14.
- 25*Dignitatis Humanae* in *Religious Liberty*, 7, 178.
- 26Will, 126.
- 27Canavan, “The Popes and the Economy”: 38
- 28For a thoughtful analysis of the crisis of the American family, see Allan C. Carlson, *Family Questions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1988). For Carlson’s suggestions as to how “Catholic social teaching” can assist us in devising government policies capable of addressing this crisis, see “Economic Justice and the Family” in *Private Virtue and Public Policy: Catholic Thought and National Life*, ed. James Finn (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 49-58.
- 29John Courtney Murray, S.J., “The School and Christian Freedom” *Proceedings of the National Catholic Educational Association*, XLVIII (August 1951): 63.
- 30Ibid.