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EDITORIAL

William R. Luckey, T.O.P.



HERE IS A STORY, PERHAPS APOCRYPHAL, REGARDING BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. AS he emerged from the last session of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 (the deliberations of which were secret) he was asked by an old woman, “What have you given us, Dr. Franklin?” His reply was, “A Republic, Madame, *if you can keep it.*”

This response of Franklin’s emphasizes one of, if not the, major issues facing Catholics as well as anyone who adheres to the classical principles of government and the natural law. Despite the fact that the government of the United States was set up within the principles of the natural law, and had a cleverly designed system of checks and balances which would help prevent the growth of tyranny, still one other element was needed which could not come from the document of the Constitution itself. That element was virtue. Professor Kenneth Grasso, whose article is contained in this issue of *Faith & Reason*, discusses the teaching of the founding fathers (writing under the pseudonym “Publius” in the *Federalist*) on the subject:

As he [Publius] is aware, his solution to the problem of faction presupposes a particular type of citizenry. It presupposes a citizenry capable of producing the type of wise or virtuous men he expects to serve as representatives. It presupposes a citizenry willing to forgo utilizing elections merely as an opportunity to select clever and zealous bargaining agents for their particular interests, in order to use elections to select the community’s wisest and most virtuous men to engage in an ongoing deliberative process about the public good. It presupposes, in the final analysis, a citizenry aware of the distinction between justice and injustice, and committed to doing justice. In short, it presupposes what Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey have termed “a virtuous people”. As Publius himself put it, “As there exists a certain degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and mistrust: so there are other qualities in human nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than in any other form.” *A debased populace, in other words, cannot govern itself with justice; the enterprise of self-government requires moral virtue.* (my emphasis)

The modern popes, as vicars of Christ and visible heads of the church have, with the fullness of truth which comes with the Catholic Faith, discussed the causes and ills of modern society at length. But on the question of morality in politics an interesting pattern emerges. As the modern world refused more and more to listen to Leo XIII and Benedict XV as they applied Christ’s moral teaching to specific problems such as the relations between capital and labor, or the problem of warfare, the Holy Fathers saw that they had to move from the specific to the general causes of modern social and political chaos. That cause is the separation of the civil authority from God. Pius XI, whose motto was, “The Peace of Christ in the Reign of Christ”, tells us in his encyclical *On the Kingship of Christ* (*Quas*

Primas) that “all men, whether individually or collectively are under the dominion of Christ. In Him is the salvation of the individual, in Him is the salvation of society. ‘Neither is there salvation in any other....’”

This teaching fell by the wayside and forced Pope Pius XII, on the eve of the worst war in history, to delineate the function of the state in unmistakable terms:

Hence, it is the noble prerogative and function of the State to control, aid and direct the private and individual activities of national life that they converge harmoniously towards the common good. That good can neither be defined according to arbitrary ideas nor can it accept for its standard primarily the material prosperity of society, but rather it should be defined according to the harmonious development and the natural perfection of man. It is for this perfection that society is designed by the Creator as a means.

With this truth in mind, and with the fact of the serious moral decay so evident in this country expressing itself in abortion and the AIDS problem just to mention two obvious examples, I decided to look into the deliberations of the Commission on the Bi-centennial of the Writing of the Constitution to see if, and to what extent, the Commission addressed itself to this serious question. The result was at one and the same time disappointing but not surprising. For years I had been teaching that the legal field and the mainstream of the political science field were shot through with positivism, and hence, political science and law had become mere technical, mechanical skills. I discovered that the great living political philosophers such as John Hallowell, Walter Berns, Father Francis Canavan, S.J., Harry Clor and others were glaringly absent from the Commission’s rosters. This was all the more serious as each of these men, internationally renowned, has written on and clearly understands the role of moral virtue in a republic. Instead of discussing the most important issues with these great political thinkers, the commission was involved in endless wrangling on such things as how affirmative action could be implemented (although not one word was said on the topic of whether it should be implemented).

I therefore decided that the Politics Program of Christendom College, if it was to be what it claims to be, must try to rescue this bi-centennial year of the Constitution from the banal and unimportant, and discuss some serious matters. The best way to do this was to hold a

panel of our own which would touch, in a scholarly way, some of the major questions facing the American system of government and American society in general.

I invited the following people to give papers at this conference: Father Francis P. Canavan, S.J. of Fordham University; Dr. Robert Cuervo of St. John’s University in New York; Professor Kenneth Grasso of Southwest Texas State University and Father Vincent Miceli of Christendom College. As discussants I invited Professor Laura Ingraham of Christendom, and a Catholic expert on the life issues, Joseph Piccione.

The Canavan, Grasso and Cuervo papers are published in this issue of *Faith & Reason*. Father Miceli’s paper, “Is America Still ‘This Nation Under God’” has already been published by the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* Vol. LXXXVII, No. 10 (July 1987), 22-27 and will not appear in these pages. Professor Grasso, who because of a last minute emergency was not able to appear at the conference itself, submitted his paper anyway. It is hoped that the publishing of these papers will assist in the alerting of the Catholics in this country to the sources of and the solutions to the problems which haunt us.

William R. Luckey, T.O.P., Ph.D.

Director
Christendom Politics Program

FOR FURTHER READING

Pope Pius XI, *On the Kingship of Christ*; Pope Pius XII, *On the Function of the State in the Modern World*; St. Thomas Aquinas. *The Political Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*; Edited by Dino Bigongiari. New York: Hafner, 1953; Heinrich Rommen. *The State in Catholic Thought*. St. Louis: Herder, 1945; Joannes Messner. *Social Ethics*. St. Louis: Herder, 1965; Igino Giordani. *The Social Message of Jesus*. Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1977; James Madison, *Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. The Federalist [Papers]*. Especially nos. 10, 47-51, 55 and 78; Willmoore Kendall and George Carey. *Me Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970; James V. Schall, SJ. *Christianity and Politics*. Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981;