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IS THERE A CATHOLIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?

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HE FAMOUS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER, THE LATE WILLMOORE KENDALL, OFTEN asked me: “Why is there not a Catholic political philosophy? We are Catholics, and where is our politics?” He complained about this a little before his unexpected death at 57 years of age. He converted to the Catholic faith a few years before his death, and had lived in Bolivia and in Spain. I met him the first time in the old Mayorazgo Hotel in Madrid in the summer of 1957. Was Kendall correct or not? Does there exist a Catholic political philosophy, and if it doesn’t, should it exist or not?

I believe that the best manner to approach the problem is first of all to study the notion of Christian philosophy in general terms. Given the fact that any philosophical episteme concerning political life must begin with a series of principles which are eminently metaphysical, since metaphysics is first or primary philosophy, the possibility of a Christian philosophy concerning the political is englobed within a broader question: Does Christian philosophy exist? The question does not arise within abstract speculation, but within history. In the second and third decades of this century, the problem arose almost with violence—not physical, clearly—but in a very heated debate between the followers of the philosophical school of the University of Louvain and the French historian-philosopher, Etienne Gilson.

The classical position of that sort of Franco-Belgian scholasticism confronting Gilson was based on the notion that philosophy is a work of reason and Christianity is an acceptance of Catholic doctrine thanks to faith. To understand is one thing, to believe another. To qualify the substantive ‘philosophy,’ with the term ‘Christian,’ destroys its proper nature as a work of reason. While it is doubtful that the defenders of this position, almost all Catholic priests, would have denied the Christian influence upon the development of the philosophical history of the Occident, they nonetheless insisted that said influence, if it had existed in fact, was only incidental or accidental, and therefore did not at all undermine the separation between philosophy as a work of reason and the Christian faith, which is based on grace. Ironically, the positions of Emile Brehier, a secularist and atheist, and that of Monsignor Noel and other followers of the famous Cardinal Mercier coincided in the debate.

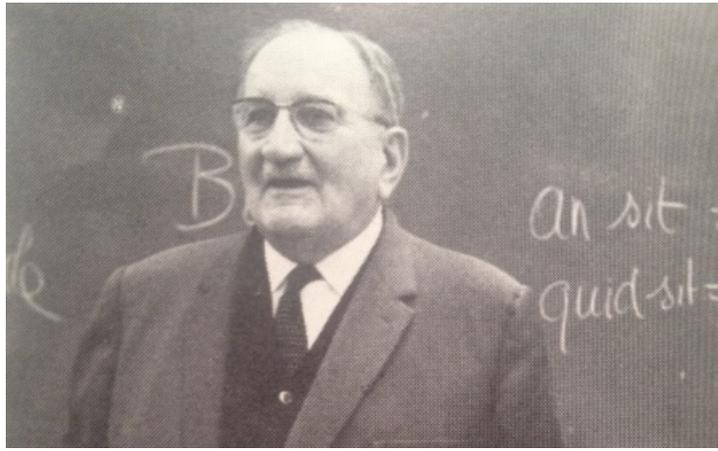
Initially, Gilson defended his position alone. Later, he was to be supported by Jacques Maritain. From his youth and almost until the beginning of middle age, Gilson was content to present himself as an historian of medieval philosophy. It is well known that he entered medieval philosophy by an indirect path, since at the end of his studies on Descartes he had to comprehend the medieval and scholastic vocabulary he employed. Although Gilson entered the medieval world by the back door, once within that household he rapidly came to be an enthusiastic historian of various medieval figures: St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, and, most definitively, of St. Thomas Aquinas.

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Gilson's study of scholasticism taught him that he was in a very different philosophical world from that of the pagan classical Greeks, as well as from the modern universe which began with Descartes. Realizing as an historian that medieval philosophy formulated and treated subjects totally unknown to classical paganism, Gilson began to speak of 'Christian philosophy,' a philosophy which, among other themes, thinks about God, a God unknown in pagan antiquity; about creation from nothing, a teaching which was not even rejected in antiquity, since one can attack only that which has been affirmed and no one affirmed creation from nothing; about divine providence in divine and human liberty; and about the meaning of personality. It became apparent that Christian philosophy had indeed existed historically, with a body of distinctive doctrines achieved thanks to the Catholic faith. The philosophy in question was indeed philosophy, a work of reason, but it would have been impossible if the philosophers in question, who were by profession theologians, had not been Christians and if they had not possessed the faith.

Gilson employed an Aristotelian logical axiom against his adversaries: *ab esse ad posse valet illatio*, an inference from being to possibility is valid. If a Christian philosophy exists historically, then it is a possibility. If someone were to maintain the opposite thesis, he must deny the evidence of history itself. A little later, in his defense of the metaphysical realism of St. Thomas, Gilson employed that same history, but now in a contrary direction. The so-called epistemological problem, "how one can proceed from the mind to things," does not have to be answered by a Thomist because for him it does not exist.

To work from within the famous Cartesian doubt in order to eradicate it, an important theme for the school of Mercier, is to fall into historicism. The same supporters of the school of Louvain, who had been against a Christian philosophy, now opposed Gilson in his dogmatic or metaphysical realism. The response was again sharp: Why do I have to resolve the Cartesian doubt and the critical problem when they are not such for



Etienne Gilson

me? As evidenced by Gilson's shifts of emphasis, a proper understanding of the role of history in intellectual life simultaneously liberates a man from history even while confirming his dependency upon it, although each comes into the foreground by taking distinct issues into consideration. Thus, Gilson defended Christian philosophy by indicating that it had already existed thanks to the enormous influence which Christianity had exerted in Western philosophy's development.

Jacques Maritain entered into the battle and endeavored to defend Gilson by employing a theory which was distinctly his own and not that of Gilson, although not necessarily opposed to it. It is necessary, affirmed Maritain, to distinguish between philosophy's 'specification' and its 'exercise.' Specification, as such, never can be Christian since a philosopher seeks a knowledge of things by employing reason alone. But, given the fact that the exercise of philosophy can be performed by a Christian, in the act of philosophizing in the existential order a Christian thinks in a Christian manner, even though this consideration does not enter into his speculation in the essential order.

I personally believe that Maritain's doctrine is defective, although for the moment I shall not enter into the subject. No one knows what Gilson thought of this defense of his own position. Being a good friend of Maritain, he assuredly was happy to find someone at his side in the controversy, but in my understanding of the matter-and I know the debate well Gilson stood fast with his defense of simply employing the existence of an historical fact without integrating Maritain's contribution.

The existence of Christian philosophy, which Gilson maintained in spite of the opposition of the school of Louvain (itself a disguised rationalism), had already been taught by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. It is interesting to note that in his intellectual autobiography Gilson tells us that he never had heard of this encyclical during his prolonged controversy spanning some fifteen years with his adversaries. When he first read it, he saw that he was justified in his position by the

highest authority in the Catholic Church, since the Pope had said the same thing fifty years before. Parenthetically we should note that Pope Leo did not himself entitle his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. Rather, the Vatican press published it under this heading simply because encyclicals customarily find their official titles based on the first two or three words therein. However, Pope Leo himself subsequently referred to his work as being concerned with the restoration of Christian philosophy according to the mind of St. Thomas.

Nonetheless, Gilson based his reflections about Christian philosophy on history, and he was correct. But I believe that one can deepen the issue if one considers philosophy's relation to human experience. The defenders of so-called 'philosophy without presuppositions' assert that in the exercise of philosophy one must abstract himself from any presupposition. Philosophy, according to these pragmatists, places itself in a box hermetically sealed from any exterior influence. In a word, philosophy must take its departure from nothing. To give to this consideration the philosophical rigor it merits, I confess that I find three defects in this position:

a) "A philosophy without presuppositions" is a proposition which can be understood logically without finding any inherent contradiction, but the contrary can be thought as well without contradiction: "a philosophy with presuppositions." Both propositions can be considered and both are intelligible, but neither is evident due to any imposition of experience, or as a *per se nota* judgment is evident. This is to say one can consider either proposition from the view of logic alone without finding any evidence to move the mind to affirm one or the other.

b) "A philosophy without presuppositions" would be a philosophy without history, without experience, without a past, a doctrine built up by a man in a box isolated from human life. Such has never existed, since all philosophies have arisen from an historical soil. It is evident that philosophy does not philosophize, but only men.

c) Ultimately, in realist and not merely formal terms, a presuppositionless philosophy is a contradiction, since it contains at least one, namely, that there is none! Existentially and epistemologically, the positivist's posture is a bad joke.

If we return to the man who philosophizes, we always find that his thinking comes from a subsoil of experience, which conditions him to think as he does. Experience is not identically philosophy, but without experience there is no philosophy. Experience, if it goes beyond experience considered as mere sociological fact, can be formulated in a question. I become aware of contingency, for example, of the possibility of suddenly dying, if I am a soldier passing over a field of mines, or if I am ill without the possibility of finding a remedy for my infirmity, or if I am a man in love who finds himself before the mystery and glory of his beloved's fragile presence. A philosophical question can emerge from this series of experiences: What is being or existence? In a less dramatic manner, a professor can prepare his students for a philosophical investigation by constructing a rhetorical canvas of words, gestures, and readings, which will bring the student to direct himself towards formulating the same question. Philosophical questions always arise from something anterior to them namely, human experience, And human experience is history.



No one receives an answer to a question that is unasked, for such is guaranteed by the principle of contradiction. Christian philosophy, as do all philosophies, rises in an historical soil from which there naturally emerge a series of questions. In the pagan world, to give an example, no one speculated about human dignity, and nobody asked about it. The same occurred with questions about a Creator God, Divine Providence, and with the question of being not as form or substance but as existence. It turns out that Christian philosophy as defended by Etienne Gilson and his followers points to this fact: Christians interested themselves in a whole series of questions unknown to paganism. Moreover, this Christian influence upon philosophy centered in great part on metaphysics, first philosophy.

However, the canvas we have sketched becomes somewhat more complex when we confront political philosophy. For a number of reasons, some of which have not yet been studied, medieval political philosophy was not as original or even as Christian as its metaphysics. A new world was being born from the shadows of many centuries of barbarism, a brilliant and original world in

regard to its institutions, but when scholastics turned to thinking about political matters they were inclined to content themselves with returning to the classical Greek world. They did so without advertent to the truth that this world had already died some fifteen hundred years before, and that they now lived in a radically new Christian order.

For Plato, as well as for Aristotle, the basis for speculation on things political was the Greek *polis*, the classical city. For us, it is an historical curiosity that when medieval thinkers brought themselves to speculate on political life, they almost always took the same point of departure, as though society of their own time reflected that very social entity. However, by then the *polis* had ceased to exist except on some pieces of paper and parchment. In reality, the medievals lived in a feudal world whose structures had been glimpsed neither by Plato nor by Aristotle. For example, St. Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* is exactly what it claims to be, an exposition of something that had ceased to exist some fifteen centuries before the birth of Saint Thomas. By a curious historical irony, medieval political philosophy in great part is a sagacious commentary, but it has little to do with the grand Christendom within which those same thinkers lived.

However, there were precious exceptions. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in his *Summa theologiae*, which is not among his Aristotelian commentaries, developed a theory according to which the best government would be a monarchy tempered by democratic and aristocratic principles. The monarchy would guarantee unity of action in the political order. Its paradigm was the divine governance of creation. An aristocracy would guarantee the counsel of the wisest in the regime. Lastly, the democratic principle would preserve interior peace, since a people is more apt to accept a series of laws when these have, in part, come from the people themselves. Without entering into details, it is interesting to note that Saint Thomas does not found participation of the people in the government upon some supposed right, but upon the desirability of interior peace in the service of the common good.

In fourteenth-century England, Sir John Fortescue, in his defense of the regime called *politicum et regale* and not merely regale---demonstrated that the power of the king is always found specified and limited, if not by the laws, then by his own passions. Better, however, a le-

gal limitation inherited from history, "the common law," than one which is a merely capricious limitation. To seek absolute power is a psychological and metaphysical impossibility, since only in God do we find Power and Wisdom united in the unicity of the Divine Essence. It is as though Fortescue was struggling against Bodin some two centuries before the latter's birth. An absolute monarchy is an impossibility because all human power always finds specifying limits if not in laws, then in psychological factors which subsist within the king himself. Christian doctrine on the infinite Divine Power served as a compass for this teaching of Fortescue.

In spite of these and a few other exceptions, the historical basis for philosophical speculation on the political continued to be the Greek polis. It is as if the advances towards a Catholic political philosophy were achieved haphazardly. The goal, in great part, was something else: a commentary on pagan Greek books. This finds its explication if we take into account philosophy's development among the classical pagans, who were failed politicians. They looked or tended to look towards the past. Cicero speculated on the essence of the Roman Republic at the same moment in which it was dying and giving way to the empire of Caesar Augustus. Plato and Aristotle philosophized about the Greek polis when that institution was dying. Classical political philosophy is like a rear-view mirror. There is a metaphysical truth which renders this fact intelligible, since, as I have already indicated elsewhere, the mobility of the world itself makes this science difficult, since science is founded upon the necessary and the stable. At times, what is directly beside a thinker escapes his reflection and penetration. So it was that medieval man lived a new political order, but rarely passed much time trying to understand it philosophically.

In order to comprehend Christian polity, it is necessary to jump to the nineteenth century and to the French Revolution. When a man loses something precious, he eventually becomes aware of what was lost. In great part, speculation on Christian order was not the work of medievals but of modern traditionalists. Donoso Cortes set himself to study what Europe had lost with the arrival of the Revolution. Chateaubriand emphasized the papacy when it had ceased to play a decisive role in the Occident. We can think here of the declaration of papal infallibility in Vatican I, which was proclaimed when the lay, revolutionary states had negated it both in practice and in theory. To give a contemporary example,

the sacred character of the unborn is proclaimed today due to the prevalence of abortion in the West. This character had always been taught in the West, but the less threat there was to it, the less need there was to speak about it extensively. Political philosophy, as I have tried to show, tends to emerge and flourish when the goods that are consubstantial with man are found to be threatened, or when a political order has already ceased to exist.

With this, I return to my first observations when I cited the untimely-deceased Willmoore Kendall, a convert to Catholicism and a specialist in political philosophy, who complained about the absence of a Catholic political philosophy. Where is this beast to be found? It does not exist in any supposed sacred work such as Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics*. Political speculation exists in late scholasticism which encompasses many Spaniards, such as Vitoria and Soto among others. However, in regard to the distinctly modern epoch, Catholic speculation on political matters is generally found in polemical works, in great part directed against the French Revolution. To give some examples: in traditionalist Spanish thinkers there is much insis the principle of subsidiarity, but always immersed in controversy. The same happened to Donoso Cortes. I refer to his theory of the unicity of power and the plurality of what he called 'hierarchies.' We find something analogous in Chesterton and Belloc in England, but always directed towards economic theory and their polemic against the great capitalism of their epoch. Similar reflections are found in some Austrians and Germans of the past century. However, the results are almost always the same: brilliant sketches, lucid intuitions, but nothing organized into a perfect philosophical theory. The times prohibited the leisure and peace necessary for a task of such grandeur and rigor.

It is necessary here to make a distinction in order to find the clarity needed to elucidate Catholic political philosophy. I should like to distinguish between what Spaniards call an 'ideario,' [which we shall translate henceforth as 'ideary,' for lack of a closer English equivalency], an 'ideology,' and a 'Catholic political philosophy.' Without making these distinctions, there is the possibility of falling into fierce confusion. I acknowledge that

these definitions are provisional and open to refinements and rectifications.

1) I would define an 'ideary' as a body of affirmations, and, at times, negations, which support a political movement. They point to a concrete political situation that a group in question wishes to preserve, better, restore, change, or annul. Its purpose is eminently practical. In this sense, it is perfectly permissible to speak of an 'ideary' as being 'republican,' 'monarchical,' 'liberal,' 'Carlist,' 'federal,' or any number of other designations.

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Within this repository of assumptions, there are a multiplicity of affirmations, whether theological, philosophical, sociological, economical, cultural, as well as others. A synthesis of disciplines, inclinations, desires, rejections, and even usages and customs comes into play therein. It is a response to the question: Why do you favor this political order? When such dominates a given society it gives that community what I call a 'public or thodoxy.' When it is only partially influential, generally among those without political power, I think the term 'ideary' is preferable to that of 'public orthodoxy.'

We each have our 'idearies.' They are composed of what we wish our society to be and the reasons we hold to justify this desire. An 'ideary' is a body of doctrine and opinion about the political, although it is not limited to philosophical principles. While explicitly acknowledging them, it nonetheless transcends them. Although I do not particularly like the term 'ideary,' I nonetheless cannot find a more adequate word to express such a conjunction of affirmations, inclinations, beliefs, desires, habits, movements rooted in the subrational, and propositions well developed in the light of reason. In other words, it signifies the defense of a manner of being, of a style of existing in an historical society.

Before the domination by mass communications, which tend to level all distinctions between men as well as peoples, each nation had one: a manner according to which it presented itself both to the interior and the exterior world. A Spaniard, an Englishman, a Frenchman, could each defend, value, and define his *modus vivendi*.

This declaration of concrete human reality we can call 'ideary' or 'public orthodoxy.' He who is opposed to a man with an 'ideary' in this sense is a cosmopolita, one who neither pertains to a specific social order nor who has roots.

2) When we turn to the notion of 'ideology,' we encounter something equivocal in the very word. In today's North American press any politician with strong convictions is labeled an 'ideologue.' The term has a negative tone. In Austria, the great writer Dr. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn employs the word in a positive sense: 'ideology' for him is a synonym of 'doctrine,' and for von Kuehnelt-Leddihn 'doctrine' can be either good or bad. On the contrary, in the United States, Dr. Russell Kirk, the patriarch of the conservative intellectual movement, abhorred the word. For him, 'ideology' points to something malevolent which pertains to the effort of 'ideologues,' those defenders of the rationalist spirit of the French Revolution and the enemies of the best traditions of the West. The same occurs with the employment of the term in Spain by Gonzalo Fernandez de la Mora.

I am quite in agreement with Kirk and Fernandez de la Mora concerning the usage of the term, but I should like to add here what the deceased Franco-American philosopher, Yves Simon, said about the matter. For Simon, an ideology is a partial philosophy and therefore false in the service of a practical political goal. It is false because it seeks to give an explication of everything and finishes by being a partial explanation. For my part, I should like to stress the fact that an ideology always begins with a desire to change either a particular society or, more generally, the entire world. An ideology begins with general discontent with what exists and subsequently seeks a theory presumably capable of destroying the real to achieve its aim of constructing a new world. There is a hatred towards being which lurks in the depths of all ideologies.

Eric Voegelin noted that ideology always converts itself into a gnosticism. What is typical of ideology is its insistence upon explaining the totality of the real through a doctrine which the ideologue pretends is an exact science. Marxism is possibly the ideology which has had the most success in the Western intellectual tradition, and the most failures in the real world. What is decisive for the ideologue is a desire to suppress or forget any fact which is not capable of entering into his system. In a work of his youth, Karl Marx wrote literally: "Any man who becomes aware of his contingency would have to

admit the existence of God. However, this question is forbidden to socialist man." This is the most astonishing phrase in a writer I have ever encountered in my entire life. It is supposedly necessary to suppress or forget the evidence for the existence of God for the sake of setting the Marxist ideology in motion!

The example of Marxism is very extravagant, but it is easy to find others which are not so extreme. The economist Wilhelm Roepke related a conversation that he had with the famous professor Hayek. The two economists were walking through a garden of vegetables mixed with flowers cultivated by some Swiss factory workers. Roepke remarked to his companion how beauty and communion with nature were accessible to these men and that, thanks to this cultivation, modest though it was, a precious dimension was added to their lives. Hayek's response was to grumble: "But, look at the lost hours those men could have spent in the factory!" This is pure ideological fanaticism, Liberal Capitalist fanaticism! It is the fanaticism of a defender of the free market without limits. The leisure and pleasure of the gardeners had no place in the mechanism of heavy industry and, therefore, they thwarted the supremacy of efficacy and statistics needed for its growth. Roepke, as much as Hayek, was a defender of the free market, but he did not exalt it into an absolute.

The infallible sign of ideology is its lack of patience with factors which fall outside its cerebralized doctrines. All ideologies have a concrete, existential goal, and they subordinate all other factors of life towards this finality. From the point of view of a political philosopher, the capital sin of ideology is its presumptuous longing to be a philosophical science which will support action thanks to having discovered supposed inexorable laws written within human nature. Ideologies have not succeeded in their objectives and they have not the humility to admit their failures. Before abandoning the topic, consider again Marxism: a fanaticism which reduces everything to a supposed law of history, an economic law. Yet Marxism has revealed itself more and more for what it is: the most crushing economic failure that history has ever known. At this very moment, hunger exists in Russia. It is not necessary to say anything more.

3) A Catholic political philosophy could not be a mere public orthodoxy or an 'ideary,' but neither is it an ideology. Even though a Catholic public orthodoxy can employ a series of fundamental principles, it is almost

certain that they will be rooted in theology and not in philosophy. If philosophy enters, it does so in an indirect manner and as a rational tactic to make intelligible the Catholic doctrine which forms the marrow of said orthodoxy. Catholic doctrine here is the Catholic faith, which as such enters, forms, and conforms a Catholic Christian community to itself. The most outstanding historical example is the Carlist 'ideary' in Spain, which is not simply an adhesion to Catholic unity, but rather an entire web of institutions, attitudes, and customs, each having its roots in historical fact, which reveals Spain to be an entity which exists thanks to its allegiance to the Catholic faith. Without this affirmation, the enormous differences which we find in that geographical place in the world would have made the very existence of that nation which we today call Spain impossible. In my understanding, being a man from outside but one who has lived in Spain for many years, the 'public orthodoxy' which informs the history and existence of Spain is itself distinctly Catholic. However, none of this is identical with a supposed 'Catholic political philosophy,' for Catholic political philosophy would never be merely a defense of a given political order, no matter how good it may be.

Said philosophy, like all philosophies, as I have tried to indicate, must receive its questions from human experience. Here I do not raise a banner, although I do discern something implanted in reality. Every philosophy flows from the soil of experience, without which there would exist neither the philosophy nor the man who philosophizes. My affirmation here is one with that realism which I have inherited from St. Thomas Aquinas. A Catholic political philosophy must arise from a series of questions, the specifications and determinations of which are articulated from within the experience of Catholic men.

Let no one complain here of a supposed influence of religion upon philosophy! Pragmatists', Marxists', and idealists' questions, all come from men whose experience has been formed, whether it be as pragmatists, Marxists, or idealists. Questions do not arise from nothing. Have we not already indicated why? As Catholics who are also philosophers, it is eminently reasonable to formulate questions about, for example, the authority of God and His power. St. Thomas wrote one of his most profound works on the divine power, his *De potentia Dei*. Why cannot I, taking into account the Divine Power which is infinite and without limits, ask myself: What is the nature of human political power? The same thing happens in regard to Divine Authority, and with a series

of similar issues which pertain to the political.

There is no univocity which unites God with creatures. Without entering into the issue in detail, if such existed, there would have to be 'something' more profound which would unite the same perfection said of Him and of the things which He has created. But beyond God there is nothing. He cannot be placed in any genus. Perfections said of God always depend upon those we find first in creatures and subsequently predicate of God by always employing the surgery of negation. He is Good, but not as I understand goodness, et cetera. However, this shadow in which the philosophy of God terminates has a light at the end of the tunnel. Beginning with things, we elevate our intelligences towards the unseen and hidden God. Then we can return to the earth of creation. This return to our point of departure according to the Renaissance commentator on St. Thomas, Sylvester of Ferrara (*In Prima Pars, Summa contra Gentiles*, c. xxxiv, ed. Leoninis, pp. 106-110), illuminates our beginning. First, I know something of wisdom, for example, as discovered in wise men. Second, I predicate wisdom of God. Next, returning to earth, I understand wisdom again in men, but now more profoundly, since I am aware that human wisdom is a participation in the Divine Wisdom.



Apply this to political philosophy. Knowing what Power and Authority are in God, I am able to better comprehend what authority and power are in men. Knowing, thanks to the faith, that Christ is a Person in two natures, I can later better comprehend the relations between nature and person in humans, as well as the dignity of the person and his character of being *sui juris*.

Knowing that Being in God is identical with the Divine Essence, in returning to creation I can better understand that human existence itself is found differentiated or specified by a hierarchy of orders and functions, all because it is true that being and essence are not identical in creatures. Knowing that God is Supreme and Infinite Love, I am better able to grasp the role of love in political life. Here, St. Augustine has gone before us in his *De Civitate Dei*.

This intellectual task, already begun in part, has never been developed into a complete theory which we could without qualification call 'Catholic political philosophy.' It is a labor which remains to be completed. I would dare say that the fundamental principle of *political theology* is the Kingship of Jesus Christ, proclaimed throughout history and concretized in the encyclical *Quas Primas* of Pope Pius XI. No political philosopher can read that document without stopping and asking himself the following: If Christ is the principle of all authority and power, what are authority and power in the political order? The question is philosophical, but the experience in the faith from whence the question arises is religious.

Jacques Maritain, as I indicated above, spoke of an exercise of philosophy which is distinctly Christian for the Christian who philosophizes, and a specification which remains distinctly rational. For years I accepted that distinction, but in terminating these reflections I would like to stand things on their heads. As articulated here, specification in regard to the question raised is Catholic. It has arisen from within the faith. However, the exercise of reason as presented is totally philosophical. The work, as indicated, remains to be done, not by starting from nothing, but rather from seeds already sown throughout our tradition.

