



Charles I and Philip II of Spain by Antonio Arias Fernández

The “Catholic State”

Anachronism, Arch-enemy, or Archetype?

by Peter A. Kwasniewski

It is assumed by many that the age-old problem of Church-State relations, a problem that grew ever more intense from the Reformation period through the so-called Enlightenment, has been uneasily resolved, *de facto* and *de iure*, in favor of democratic pluralism and a benign liberal ideology to which even the Church has found it possible to reconcile herself, in exchange for common recognition of basic human rights. From this perspective, Vatican II’s *Dignitatis Humanae* is taken as the turning-point in Catholic social teaching, which had traditionally emphasized the Catholic confessional State as the ideal, and the non-Catholic or pluralistic state as an evil that prudence could tolerate but never approve.

Inevitably, careful students of the Church’s Magisterium have found this view a troubling simplification. If the Church has, in fact, changed so consistent, long-standing, and significant a teaching, what does this mean for doctrinal continuity

with the past? To paraphrase Pope Benedict XVI, can a Church be trusted who changes her mind on matters of such weight, lauding as modern progress that which she condemned as godless apostasy only a few decades earlier? Moreover, is reconciliation with the aggressive secularism of the Enlightenment really as easy as blessing democracy while adding a few stern reminders about the need for religious underpinnings? Finally, if the Fathers of Vatican II had truly wanted a sea-change in Catholic political doctrine, how can one explain the persistent qualifications and footnotes—in conciliar documents, in the encyclicals of John Paul II, in the new *Catechism*, in doctrinal interventions of the CDF—that refer the reader to the unambiguous formulations of Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius XI, Pius XII, and John XXIII? One begins

to suspect that we are not dealing with any substantive doctrinal change, but rather with a rhetorically palatable, diplomatic re-clothing of the same substance. Yet this

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also raises questions of its own. How can one respond to the common objection that such a re-clothing amounts to a repudiation or a contradiction?

To help sort through these matters, I will define the concept of “the Catholic state.” Then I will turn to Vatican II and, drawing chiefly upon *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, establish that the essence of the doctrine is restated by the Council, albeit in terms believed to be more adapted to the present historical situation. (I do not take up here the question of whether this attempt at a new formulation has been successful either in transmitting true doctrine to Catholics or in opening those outside the Church to her beneficent influence; I think not, but to elaborate on that skepticism would be the task of another article.) I will show that it is impossible to repudiate the ideal of the Catholic state without implicitly repudiating the claims of Jesus Christ and His Church over mankind as a whole and in each individual. A society and government imbued with reverence for the divine law is the full, natural embodiment of the Faith in the midst of the world Christ redeemed and wishes to save (cf. John 3:17).

What is a Catholic State and How Does It Arise?

Materially, a Catholic state is a sovereign political entity made up of a people predominantly Catholic in profession. Formally, it is defined as a nation with a regime or government whose constitution commits it to the support of the one true Faith, whose laws are in harmony with the teaching of the Magisterium on faith and morals, and whose policies implement Catholic social teaching to the widest extent possible.

The Catholic state is the natural, organic outcome of the Faith when it is fully *lived* by a people. As Russell Hittinger reminds us, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* in §43 invites the laity to make it a matter of conscience “that the divine law be impressed on the affairs of the earthly city” (*ut lex divina in civitatis terrenaе vita inscribatur*). When this is done consistently, on a broad scale, over some length of time, the natural and proper result is a Catholic society, culture, and state.

The Church and her Faith will be, for the majority of citizens, the point of reference for understanding themselves and the world, the framework of their daily lives, customs, arts, letters, festivities, rituals. She will be the dominant presence in the life of the individual as in the life of the community. This has never ceased to be the ideal towards which the Church strives. In an address to the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Rome in 1955, Pope Pius XII stated:

While the Church and State have known hours and years of conflict, there were also from the time of Constantine

the Great until the contemporary era and even recently, tranquil periods, often quite long ones, during which they collaborated with full understanding in the education of the same people. The Church does not hide the fact that she considers such collaboration normal, and that she regards the unity of the people in the true religion and the unanimity of action between herself and the State as ideal.¹

This, too, is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (1965). The Fathers first recognize the “intrinsic value” of temporal realities, and then note how easily they can be perverted to the harm of mankind, and finally issue a call to Christians, especially laity, to transform the temporal order according to the Gospel—without, of course, attempting a mistaken fusion of temporal and spiritual societies (as occurred, for example, in the caesaropapism of Byzantium, the Erastianism of some Western nation-states, and the Gal-

licanism and Josephinism of the Enlightenment). Here are the words of the Council:

The whole Church must work vigorously in order that men may become capable of rectifying the distortion of the temporal order and directing it to God through Christ. Pastors must clearly state the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use of temporal things and must offer the moral and spiritual aids by which the temporal order may be renewed in Christ (§7).



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The same document defines the “apostolate in the social milieu” as “the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives” (§13). Note that *laws* and *structures* are very clearly specified here; we are not talking merely about attitudes, social graces, and public demonstrations of piety, but the very content and manner of political life taking their bearings from Christ and His Church. In §14, Catholics are urged to take an active interest in the reconstruction and perfection of civil society according to unchanging principles, so that citizens may be prepared for receiving the Gospel. In giving this advice the Council was doing no more than echoing Pope Leo XIII, who frequently made such exhortations—as when, in the Encyclical *Immortale Dei*, he encourages the faithful “to use their best endeavors . . . to infuse, as it were, into all the veins of the State the healthy sap and blood of Christian wisdom and virtue.”

Why Is a Catholic State Desirable?

Since the Catholic Faith is revealed by God as the one true religion from which derives not only spiritual perfection (which is the decisive thing for our eternal destiny) but also the highest moral, intellectual, and cultural perfection achievable by man, it is desirable that this Faith become the sovereign, pervasive principle of the public life of a people, just as it should be the principle of the personal life of its adherents.² In this way, more men will be perfected with the full complement of virtues and more souls will attain the heavenly reward promised by Christ to those who believe in Him. Put negatively, to the degree that a society, culture, and state are non-Catholic (or worse, anti-Catholic), to that degree perfection in virtue is less likely among citizens, and the number of souls in danger of damnation greater. For a non-Catholic society, culture, or state to be a good thing in itself, the Catholic Faith would have to be false. Because the Faith is true, however, the only “end game” scenario as far as Christians are concerned is a converted nation of explicitly Christian institutions, deliberately working hand in hand with the hierarchy of

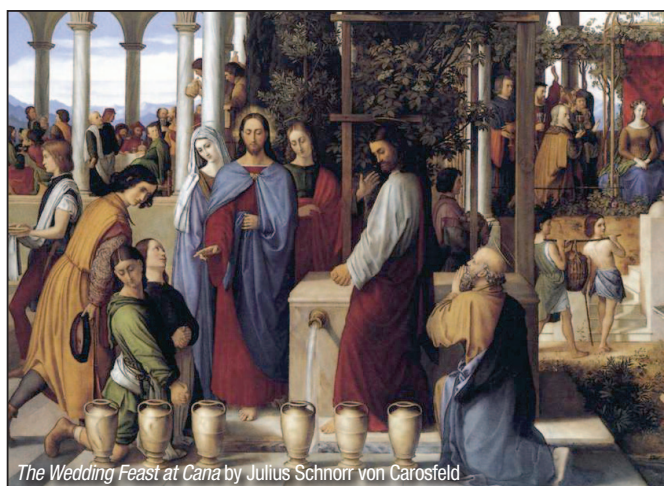
the Church.

The common good of any political community is twofold: the extrinsic common good, God; the intrinsic common good, namely, true peace, the “tranquillity of order,” which is achieved by the study of truth, the impartial administration of justice, and a fitting provision and distribution of earthly goods—all of which contribute to what may be called social happiness. Now, in a Catholic society, the extrinsic common good is all the more easily and widely attained due to adherence to the true religion that furnishes the sovereign and infallible means for attaining it. Moreover, the study of truth will be a promotion of naturally knowable as well as revealed truth, with the repression of natural and supernatural errors. The administration of justice will conform to Catholic moral teaching. Marriage and family law will be regulated according to

the principles of natural and divine law, and parents, *not* the state, will be regarded as the primary educators of their children. Material goods will be traded, bought, sold, provided, in the context of a strong juridical order inspired by the principles of Catholic social teaching. All of these elements pertain to the “true common good” of a Catholic society. It is therefore the duty of government officials, in line with the teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae*, to ensure that this common good is zealously guarded from harm, without, at the same time, attempting to interfere with the private exercise of the natural right to religious freedom of non-Catholics,³ nor restraining

a limited public exercise of that right where public order and the common welfare of the people do not demand its restraint.⁴

Notwithstanding the obvious benefits of a thoroughly Catholic society and regime, we need to consider a corresponding danger that tends to arise and grow almost imperceptibly, as the history of Europe proves in a dramatic fashion. After centuries have passed from the time of a nation’s initial conversion, it is possible that the Faith will be taken for granted; that many citizens will be poorly educated, being Catholics more by custom (often trust-



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ingly accepted and sincerely practiced) than by instruction and zealous conviction. There is thus great danger of a slow drift into an increasingly worldly mentality, as well as the perversion and corruption of citizens by errors in faith or morals spread by persuasive and “charismatic” representatives of sects that manage to gain entrance into that society. A Catholic government that really holds the common good of its people at heart is therefore obliged to limit severely the public activities of such sectarians and the public expressions of their beliefs (e.g., to prohibit entry of such people or the publication of their pamphlets), while at the same time continuing to promote, in every way possible, such religious institutions as families, parishes, monasteries, schools, and hospitals that keep the Faith alive and well in the hearts of the people.

Further Definitions and a Corollary

A non-Catholic state may be defined as one that is, or claims to be, officially neutral vis-à-vis the Church, recognizing civilly its special laws as binding on its own members,⁵ and allowing it full freedom of ministry. There are, of course, varying degrees of neutrality, ranging from “warm” to “cold.” The general philosophical framework of such a state is liberalism: *de facto* recognition of pluralism and the toleration of all views compatible with basic public order (as construed by current officeholders). An anti-Catholic state may be defined as one that denies the Catholic Church those rights that are due to her as a perfect society with a divine mandate, or, in a worst case scenario, actively persecutes and penalizes her members.

A corollary: to the extent that modern democracies place limits on all *formal* intersection between the Catholic Faith and the ordering of political society and temporal affairs, to this extent they are both anti-Catholic and tyrannical. The goal of the Enlightenment social contract theorists was to design a society from which the Catholic Church was effectively excluded, a society therefore “free” to reject with impunity all rules of faith and morals. Hence, we find a consistent exclusion of practicing Catholics from social contract experiments—one need only read Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, Samuel Adams’s *Report to the Boston Town Meeting*, and countless other examples from the eighteenth century.⁶ It follows that when Catholics *are* permitted to live within such societies or under such regimes, it is virtually at the cost of renouncing the social dynamism and authoritative structure of the Faith itself. No less a churchman than Archbishop Charles Chaput has recognized this dark logic

in John F. Kennedy’s Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in 1960, and in the continual stream of U.S. “Catholic” politicians who, abusing the noble title of conscience, throw their support behind sexual immorality and the slaughter of the unborn. At its root, the social contract demands a common creed of relativism and public indifference to the highest things.

What, then, of the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*—what kind of State, or what range of States, is this declaration addressing? Both its textual genesis and its internal preoccupations show us that *Dignitatis Humanae* is addressed to the two situations that had become dominant in the contemporary world: non-Catholic liberal pluralistic States (e.g., the United States) and anti-Catholic ideological States (e.g., Soviet Union, Nazi Germany). As Russell Hittinger convincingly argues in his book *The First Grace*,

the declaration never takes up in a systematic way the question of a “normative” Catholic State, being content to mention it in passing:

If, in view of peculiar circumstances obtaining among peoples, special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional order

of society, it is at the same time imperative that the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom should be recognized and made effective in practice.

Yet surely the declaration’s unqualified reaffirmation that “it [the teaching on religious freedom] leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ” can only be construed as support for the possibility, desirability, and ideality of such a state, regardless of what some authors or promoters of the document may have wished it might have said or may have personally believed.⁷ The final document neither excludes the Catholic confessional State nor omits to mention those essential limitations on, or norms for, the public expression of religious belief—limitations and norms that at least imply the traditional teaching.⁸

What Is at Stake

In an age of confusion, it is very important that we correctly conceptualize *the political question*—that is, the one central question on which everything else hinges. The political question *par excellence* is this: What is the status or place of the Catholic Church within a civil society and its regime?⁹ The “thesis,” i.e., the norm, the ideal, is nothing less than a fully Catholic culture, in which all the arts,

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economic life, and government are thoroughly “baptized.” The pragmatic situation of pluralism (also called the “hypothesis”) is any partially or scarcely Catholic culture, whose arts, economics, and government are determined by principles that vary from being merely compatible with, to being violently against, the Catholic Faith. Such a civil society will be imperfect according to both natural and supernatural criteria, and its existence can only be tolerated, never approved in itself or as a model.

What are the implications of abandoning the “thesis”? The three fundamental forces motivating the Christian in the world are the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Whenever, therefore, the goal of a thoroughly converted (that is, Catholic) culture and state is no longer aspired to—even if only remotely, by sighs and prayers, when its realization seems humanly impossible—then sadly, it must be the case that faith, hope, and charity are no longer the operative principles of life. They are replaced by worldly prudence, a heavenless horizon, a human love that contradicts the missionary impulse of charity. To let go of the Gospel as the norm for *everything human* is to consign oneself and society to the mediocre exercise of mediocre virtues, at best; and given human sinfulness, it may also mean throwing open the house to the expert exercise of inhuman vices, as modern political history has shown all too vividly.

We are, of course, living in an era characterized by profound unrest: the increasing rationalism of science fueling technological barbarism, the increasing irrationalism of non-Christian religions feeding horrific violence,

the increasing secularization of Western societies driving them to the brink of insanity as every perversion and aberration is not only permitted but celebrated. We must not underestimate the extent to which false ideas in philosophy, religion, and politics have brought about this world situation, nor the extent of Catholics’ complicity in it by their willingness to listen to the siren song of the Enlightenment, luring us with empty promises of a universally respectful and benevolent, value-neutral,

open-ended social order where religion would be the special preserve of the sovereign individual conscience—and never would the Catholic Faith be the public principle of social cohesion, moral orientation, intellectual light, and spiritual vitality. As the wake-up call becomes increasingly shrill, it is high time for us to rise from the drugged sleep of modernity and embrace a fully Catholic, fully traditional vision of the political order and the common good.

It may not be our privilege to see such

an order rise up from the ashes of the corrupt West, but we can be sure as steel that it will not arise from ideologies, principles, and practices that find their historical origins in the sworn enemies of the Catholic Church. ✕

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Notes

1. See Monsignor Fenton’s illuminating commentary in Michael Davies’ *The Second Vatican Council and Religious Liberty* (Long Prairie, MN: Neumann Press, 1992), 179–81. The statement of Lefebvre that Davies quotes on p. 181 is surely mistaken, since it fails to recognize the equally constant teaching of the Popes that the *least* right of the Church is freedom to perform her mission without interference, e.g., freedom to appoint bishops, freedom of communication between the bishops and the Pope, freedom of promulgation and publication of documents, and freedom to influence laws, customs, and constitution. As we know, the Church in modern times has rarely been given even this minimal freedom by supposedly Catholic states (one need only think of France or Austria). Hence the demand in *Dignitatis Humanae* for a rigorous respect of “the freedom of the Church” is anything but an empty phrase or a meek compromise. See Russell Hittinger, “How to Read *Dignitatis Humanae* on Establishment of Religion,” available at <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/hittinger.htm>.
2. On this point and the former (the definition of a Catholic culture, society, and state), see Thomas Storck, *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order*, available at <http://www.thomastorck.org/political-foundations-of-the-social-order>.
3. This private exercise is equivalent to acts of intellect and will that can be externalized in the family forum. As soon as they are brought into the political forum they become subject to the governance of the state, for the same reason that any human act does.
4. For further clarifications, see the chapter and appendix on religious freedom in Storck’s *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order*, referred to in note 2.
5. The United States is arguably an anti-Catholic state to the extent that it allows Catholics to get divorced or have abortions, when this ought to be illegal unless they formally apostatize, even as in some European countries Catholics and Protestants are legally obliged to pay church taxes unless they renounce their church membership. The fact that the State allows Catholics routinely to break their solemn oaths and promises indicates that the State, in its official capacity, considers anything religious or spiritual to be mumbo-jumbo with no discernible meaning or value.
6. From Adams’ *Report to the Boston Town Meeting* (1772): “Mr. Locke has asserted and proved, beyond the possibility of contradiction on any solid ground, that such toleration ought to be extended to all whose doctrines are not subversive of society. The only sects which he thinks ought to be, and which by all wise laws are excluded from such toleration, are those who teach doctrines subversive of the civil government under which they live. *The Roman Catholics or Papists are [thereby] excluded . . .*”
7. See Father Brian W. Harrison, “Is John Courtney Murray a Reliable Interpreter of *Dignitatis Humanae*?” available at <http://www.rtforum.org/lt/lit33.html>.
8. Here we refer to the function in *Dignitatis Humanae* of concepts such as “due (or just) public order,” “common good,” and “the objective moral law,” with respect to the exercise of any and every civil liberty—even those rooted in human nature and pertaining directly to human dignity. For further reflections on this document, see my “*Dignitatis Humanae*: The Interpretive Principles,” in *The Latin Mass* vol. 18, n. 1 (Winter 2009): 12–17, available at <http://catholictradition.blogspot.com/2009/03/dignitatis-humanae.html>.
9. Cf. Pierre Manent’s penetrating remarks along these lines in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).