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# Why Tocqueville Was Right: Catholic Citizens and the Renewal of Democracy

WELL, ANOTHER ELECTION SEASON IS UPON US, and the pundits are predicting an especially contentious campaign. Scholars of American Politics fear that the bitterness of the contest will further prompt the electorate to forgo politics in favor of more pleasant pursuits. Commentators wonder if the trend of low voter turnout will continue, and observers across the ideological spectrum voice concern that American democracy is in a crisis. At times like this, I find myself returning to figures like Alexis de Tocqueville to try to understand our republic in both its strengths and its weaknesses. Incidentally, the irony of appealing to a Frenchman to try to understand American democracy at this time is not lost on me.

Often, I'm surprised by what I find in Tocqueville. Always I'm impressed by the depth of his insight. Tocqueville was animated by one question: Why does the American polity work? And his answer, I think, would surprise a contemporary audience. For Tocqueville, the key to the success of American democracy was not the novel way in which it separated government powers, nor its constitutional protection of liberty, nor was it the ingenious design of American federalism—however important each of these elements were. Rather, Tocqueville maintained that our democracy worked because of the character, that is, as he phrased it, "the whole moral and intellectual condition," of its citizens.

And in this connection, he saw no more important influence than religious faith. Indeed, Tocqueville went so far as to call religion "the first of America's political institutions."

But what did he mean by this? Of course, he didn't mean that religion exercises a formal political role through a nationally established church; the First Amendment prohibited this. Rather, he meant that religion profoundly shaped not only the heart and the home, but also the mind and will and public actions of American citizens. As he saw it, Christian faith uniquely prompted Americans to do and to forebear in ways that benefited their political community. Specifically, he noted that religion facilitated the use of their extensive political freedom. As he put it: "While the law permits Americans to do what they please, religion prevents them from conceiving, and forbids them to commit, what is rash or unjust."

In this vein, Tocqueville criticized what he considered the naïve optimism—and atheism—of the radical revolutionaries of his own country. These men, he observed, earnestly attempted to cultivate a spirit of freedom in their countrymen and often do so by attacking religion as an outmoded constraint. But in doing so, Tocqueville remarked, "they obeyed the dictates of their passions and not of their interests," for he insisted that "despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot." Indeed, he argued that religion is more needed in a democratic regime than in any other. And so he concludes this discussion in *Democracy and America* by provocatively asking, "How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity?"

So one of the benefits of religious faith, as Tocqueville saw it, was the fact that religion has the capacity to constrain human beings interiorly when they enjoy vast external liberty under the law. Or, to put it more positively, it teaches them how to use their freedom well. Another benefit Tocqueville identified was the way in which Christian belief tends to support democratic equality—the *sine qua non* of successful self-government. In this regard, Tocqueville suggested, somewhat counter-intuitively, that Catholicism is a great ally of American democracy. Recall that he was writing in 1831. He observed that Catholics "constitute the most republican and the most democratic class in the United States." This is a really puzzling observation for him to have made. Why

did he say it? He argued that Catholic ecclesiology favors a sense of human equality; in light of the distinction between clergy and laity, all of the non-ordained are on the same plane, irrespective of social station. He also contended that Church authority has an equalizing effect upon the faithful. That is, it subjects them all to the same standard and so, as he puts it, "confounds all the distinctions of society at the foot of the same altar, even as they are confounded in the sight of God."

Tocqueville was responding in part to the suspicion that Catholic immigrants would threaten the achievement of American democracy by importing the loyalties and habits of the *ancien regime*; they would, quite simply, undermine democratic equality. But a resurgent monarchy is not the challenge we face. And so I would take Tocqueville's analysis in another direction, giving different reasons why Catholic citizens are so important to the vitality of American democracy. My reasons correspond to what I perceive to be three main problems vexing our polity: first, political apathy or, worse, an active disdain for politics; second, confusion about the nature of freedom and law; and third, a frightening reductionism that infects public policymaking. Catholicism offers profound resources for resolving each of these problems.

Let me begin with the first. Commentators across the political spectrum have lamented a growing sense of apathy among the electorate. For instance, the 1996 election had the lowest voter turnout since Calvin Coolidge. That's a long time. And that bespeaks a very real problem for our democracy. They attribute this to a variety of factors. For instance, E.J. Dionne, in his book *Why Americans Hate Politics*, notes that the electorate feels alienated by the extreme positions staked out by political activists. Others note that the voters are simply turned off by the bitterness of political disputes.

I would add another factor. There's a pervasive sense that political engagement is a matter of personal preference, in the way that taking a hobby is a reflection of taste. This, I think, stems from a basic philosophical error, largely unconscious, about the nature of politics. We are laboring, it seems to me, under the inheritance of a contractual model of politics (and, for that matter, most of our other relationships). The political order, the

model suggests, is a human contrivance designed especially to protect people from physical harm. Politics, so the argument goes, is a matter of convention, and the dictates of government hold no special moral weight but command deference mostly because of the threat of force. Our political obligations, moreover, are matters of choice; if we haven't contracted the obligations, we're not bound by them.

At a popular level, it seems to me, this manifests itself in low voter turnouts, attempts to avoid the most basic of civic duties (like jury service), and a general disregard of the *res publica* in favor of private pursuits. To address these symptoms, we need to address the heart of the problem: How do we conceive of politics?

Catholic social thought offers an important perspective here. It takes its bearings on political questions from several sources, including scripture, a vast body of philosophical reflection, and the works of the encyclical tradition. From the Old Testament, for instance, we learn that God cares about politics, about political justice, the right use of power, honest judges, upright kings, and good laws. From the New Testament, we learn that political authority is a divinely ordained service. St. Paul, for instance, exhorts his listeners to "be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God," (Romans 13:1). And he counsels the brethren to offer prayers of intercession and thanksgiving "for kings and all who are in high positions," (Timothy 2:1-2). Likewise, Peter enjoins the believers to adopt an attitude of respect for the offices of politics, urging them to "honor the emperor," (1 Peter 2:17).

Such references are suggestive of what a Christian disposition toward political authority should be, but they do not constitute a developed concept of Christian citizenship. These elemental convictions about the origin of government and the respect it commands require elaboration. I have found one important source for this elaboration in the political theology of the Thomistic tradition. Importantly, Thomas Aquinas rejected the view that government was simply remedial of sin and argued that government of some kind would have been necessary before the fall. This seems implausible to a modern audience

accustomed to seeing political authority primarily as an agent of coercion and punishment. For Aquinas, though, the punitive function of government, made necessary by sin, was secondary and accidental to its main function: ensuring the conditions for the fullest moral, intellectual, and spiritual development of persons. You might recognize that language, of course, from Vatican II, from *Gaudium et spes*, and the way that the Council understood the common good. So, in other words, political authority, for Thomas, was charged with care for the common good.

Even John Calvin, a notable theological critic of Aquinas, vested government with the same important functions and praised political office in extravagant terms. Reflecting upon Paul's famous dictum in Romans 13, Calvin insisted, "[N]o man can doubt that civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life" (Institutes 4:20).

Now Peter and Paul and Aquinas and Calvin were not naïve. They had an acute sense of sin and the temptation to abuse authority. Political corruption was no less common in their day than it is in ours. Yet, it seems to me that they were able to hold in tension two fundamental principles: first, though an office is ordained by God, there is no guarantee that it will be exercised in a godly way; and second, that the corrupt exercise of an office does not corrupt the office itself. A challenging implication follows: Christians must respect political authority, irrespective of who wields it.

But of course the question is: What does respect entail? Surely it doesn't entail passive acceptance of grievously unjust laws. (The last century tragically attests to the cost of such quietism.) Nor does it prohibit the removal of bad men from office. Civil disobedience and, in extreme cases, revolution find warrant in most Christian political thought. Even Aquinas and Calvin, for instance, identify circumstances in which Christians are duty bound to disobey the law, and their intellectual heirs identify circumstances necessitating revolt. Importantly, civil disobedience and revolution in these cases is not anarchistic, but rather aims to restore genuine authority, that is, authority true to its divine ordination.

Under ordinary conditions, however, respect for government requires obedience to the law. But it requires much more than that. Most of us are not in serious danger of lawbreaking; our temptations and choices are less dramatic. As we enter another election season, it is important to consider of what these are. Campaigners face the temptation of mudslinging or, worse, character assassination in order to win a seat. Reporters confront the pressure to produce yellow journalism to satisfy consumer taste. Editorial writers wrestle with the lure of the easy *ad hominem* attack. And private citizens struggle with a secret delight in the foibles of public officials.

If these appear to be small matters, then our perception could stand readjustment. The cumulative effect of such decisions, the decisions of editorial writers, of campaigners, of citizens delighting in the foibles of candidates and so forth, is dramatic. As a people, we are either degraded or ennobled. But these decisions are not only important in the aggregate. They matter to the individual soul. The wisest teachers in the Christian tradition, starting with the master Teacher himself, sternly warn against sinful words and attitudes that harm the reputation of other people. There doesn't seem to be an exception clause for people in public life. They inveigh against the sins of detraction, calumny, and rash judgment—categories not much in vogue but pertinent nevertheless. These sensitive observers strictly distinguish between the public airing of another's defects made necessary for public safety, for instance, and the kind of derogatory speech found in the "politics of attack" that plagues our culture. They forbid false statements—even against a rightly despised opponent, and they condemn the disposition to assume the moral fault of another without sufficient foundation.

How different would American politics be if Christians considered the relevance of these categories to our public life? In this election year, it is timely to reflect on our ordinary political conduct in light of ancient theological principles. This, too, is due to Caesar. I would argue that recovering a sense of political authority as divinely ordained for high purposes and deserving of respect would go a long way toward remedying the apathy or, worse, the toxic disdain for politics we experience in our country.

But the Catholic political tradition offers more than a means to a noble or political culture. It can remedy the second problem I mentioned above, namely, a basic confusion about the nature of freedom and law. A common attitude in our culture is that freedom and law, in principle, oppose each other. The underlying assumption here is that freedom consists in indiscriminate choice. Think about the resonance of the rhetoric "freedom to choose" as though "to choose" were not a transitive verb. I am free to the extent that I can choose *x*, *y*, or *z* according to my preference. Law then, if it prohibits the choice of *x*, *y*, or *z* is inhibiting my freedom. Hence, I am disposed to think of the law as threatening. Underlying this view, I suspect, is the notion that law is primarily an instrument of the will, and that, by extension, politics is largely about power. As Thrasymachus famously contended against Socrates, "justice is the interest of the stronger" (*Republic I*: 338c).

Catholic social thought offers a profoundly different view. It sees law as the vehicle for coordinating the common good; that is, it is a means of promoting individual and social happiness. To appeal to Aquinas again, law is not a function of the will; it is not about power or the imposition of one person's desires upon another. Rather, it is born of reason, and is issued by those who take care of the community as a whole in the service of human flourishing. (Of course, we are given an essential view of law here. Obviously, in practice, Aquinas recognized that there were scores of bad laws on the books.)

Law has tremendous religious significance. As Pope John Paul II affirmed in his Jubilee Address to Politicians, lawmaking is "a task which brings man close to God, the Supreme Legislator, from whose Eternal Law the validity and obligatory force of every other law is ultimately derived."

This connection is worth pondering. God is at one and the same time law-giver and liberator, the one who commands and the one who sets free. This suggests that law and freedom are not in tension, in principal, but they somehow enjoy a complementary relationship. This also suggests that freedom has to be understood in a particular way, namely as the power to become our best selves. Borrowing a term from the Dominican

moral theologian Serais Pinckaers, I would argue that we should think about freedom as "freedom for excellence." It has a kind of directional thrust. It is oriented toward what will make us good and happy and whole.

Genuine law, then, law that is true to its nature, does not inhibit, but rather promotes this kind of freedom. As I see it, understanding the complementary relationship between law and freedom is especially needful in our cultural context where there is a kind of reflexive libertarianism that informs the reactions of citizens across the political spectrum, and it reduces political engagement to a contest of wills. As one wag put it, "the right wants government out of the market, the left wants government out of the bedroom."

This brings us to the third and final way in which Catholic social teaching can help us renew American democracy. It escapes the trap of ideology. Quite simply, it cuts across every political allegiance. Instead of working within the easy and comfortable—but hopelessly inadequate—categories of liberal and conservative, Catholic social thought prompts us to an independent analysis of political proposals, judging them in light of a Catholic anthropology. In this vein, Catholics are uniquely equipped to combat the reductionism that infects public policymaking today.

Let me try to bring Catholic social thought in touch with two different areas of policymaking and see how the richness of the Catholic anthropology informs the process. Environmental regulation and stem cell research are two issues that tend to be exclusive of each other or in some way in tension with each other. It seems to me that it is a mark of how impoverished our politics is that one would not expect the same person to be concerned about both things.

To give you a quick example, I was doing some writing in Washington, D.C., last year on Catholic environmental ethics, and it was not at all well received by some conservative friends of mine. That was disheartening to me. I was not disheartened that they were not

inclined to buy the argument—the argument might have been flawed—but that they were so disinclined to engage the whole topic.

Similarly, I went to a lecture at Georgetown given by a professor who was talking about social justice, the increasing divide between the rich and poor, and especially, the plight of folks in the inner city. It was very moving to me. I commended him on the argument, but I said that I thought there was a very important lacuna in the case, which was that he did not at all address the issue of unwed pregnancies in the inner city, the lack of fathers in the home, and he didn't take a richer view of the sociological phenomenon that is life in the inner city.

The thrust of his argument was about solidarity, and my point was that solidarity begins in the home; that is the primary school of solidarity. If you don't see solidarity between a husband and a wife and then among the family members themselves, it is very difficult to communicate that to other people, let alone people you don't even know who are in a very different socioeconomic niche.

The burden of my argument then and the burden of my argument now is that a Catholic vision of human beings, of politics and social life, is coherent and comprehensive. There is an underlying anthropology that grounds Catholic social teaching, its concern for social justice, its sexual teaching, and its sacramental theology. The kind of dichotomy that is popularly perceived between people on the left and people on the right when it comes to things like environmental regulation or stem cell research is exactly the kind of dichotomy that Catholic teaching defies.

When approaching environmental policy, Catholics are singularly able to resist the impulse to regard natural resources as simply material to be used at will for our comfort and security. Such an attitude has implicitly informed much of our land use. In the words of Aldo Leopold, founder of the Wilderness Society, we have too often used the natural world according to a simplistic formula of economic utility, which "defines no right or wrong, assigns no obligations, calls for no sacrifice, implies no change in the

current philosophy of values." Hence, Leopold's plea is for a more comprehensive land ethic informed by what he terms "an ecological conscience." Incidentally, Pope John Paul II has picked up that language of "an ecological conscience."

I would argue that Catholic theology yields vital, indeed indispensable, resources for the development of such a comprehensive ethic and the formation of such a conscience. I think that the Church's understanding of the sacramentality of creation, the requirements of a just social order, and the resources of the spiritual life are critical elements in the theoretical and practical enterprise of conservation. Nature is surely a material resource for human use, but it is a resource for human use under a very particular kind of dispensation, what Pope John Paul II calls a "ministerial dominion."

But that's not all it is. It is God's, and it is good. It has both mundane and sublime purposes. Think about the sacramental life and the way in which it relies upon natural resources, natural goods: water, bread, wine, and so forth.

Nature also inspires contemplation, so it cannot be seen merely in terms of human utility. It cannot fit into that kind of simple calculus. Moreover, our use of natural resources should be informed by an appreciation of our deep ecological interdependence. Again, to use a Leopoldian phrase, "we're in a biotic community." When the Pope talks about an ecological crisis, he recognizes it is not only a simple crisis of resources, as though the crisis could be solved by mere technical solutions, but he also recognizes it as a moral crisis—that the wastefulness of some affects the desperate poverty of many. So, it requires conversion. The development of an ecological conscience is not a work of biology simply—or World Health Organization studies; it actually requires the life of grace.

Likewise, a Catholic vision resists a similarly reductionistic impulse at work in embryonic stem cell research, an even more grievous example of instrumentalization because it affects human beings. A Catholic vision recognizes nascent human life as a sacred reality. It refuses to render it raw material. If you had access to the congressional

testimony on the stem cell debate, I hope that you would have been as chilled as I was when our statesmen were saying things like, "It's so small"—as though that had some kind of moral import to it. Or "There are so many frozen embryos," and "We're flush with frozen embryos in IVF clinics"—as though there wasn't a moral weight to the embryo itself. A Catholic vision allows a poetic profundity of the psalms to inform its vision of the tiniest member of our species. Seeing in the fragile embryo not a reserve of DNA—like any other raw material, wood or sand—but a human being mysteriously participating in the supernatural destiny of God's children.

In each of these instances—the one concerning the environment, typically a more left-wing cause, and the other concerning embryos, typically associated more with conservative thinkers—the disposition of the Catholic citizen is marked by humility for that which he didn't make and should not master. Inspired by the richness of the Church's teachings, the Catholic citizen attempts to see things whole and to see them *sub specie aeternitatis*, "under the aspect of eternity." This gives Catholics a profound political vision to offer their fellow citizens, but it will not be easy since it runs counter to deep assumptions in the culture about the nature of government, law, and freedom—and defies the facile divisions between right and left.

However difficult, we are called to such an engagement. As John Paul II has put it, "Catholic citizens have the responsibility of 'bearing witness to their own faith and being faithful to their own principles in the difficult and ever new situations which mark the world of politics.'" Our old friend, Alexis De Tocqueville, who called Catholics the most independent of American citizens, would surely agree.