

The Political Significance of the Papacy, Historically and in the Present Period

Anthony Mansueto, University of New Mexico-Gallup

Abstract

This paper is at once a *defense* of the papacy, an *analysis* of the political dynamics that have made it so difficult for the papacy to fulfill its vocation, and a *program* for the long-term future of the institution. Specifically, I will argue that not only the Roman Catholic Church but also humanity in general desperately need an institution which can hold the public authorities accountable before the court of natural law, and that the imperfections of the papacy result from the extraordinary difficulty of maintaining both the autonomy necessary both to stand up to unjust social structures and the political power to act effectively in the global political arena. The Church has relied too narrowly on the papacy as a guarantor of the Church's autonomy and political power. Only an institution strong in head and members can successfully stand up to the combined forces of unjust social structures and the ruling classes that benefit from them.

Introduction

[1] Of the institutions of medieval Europe that have survived into the modern world, none seems so out of place as the papacy. Monarchic in an age of democracy, custodian of revealed wisdom in an age which refuses to recognize the authority even of reason, the papacy seems deeply and profoundly at odds with the whole modern world. And the papacy, for its part, except for a relatively brief period during and immediately after the Second Vatican Council, has generally understood itself in much the same way. Well into the nineteenth century, the Vatican issued regular condemnations of not only atheism, democracy, socialism but also of telegraphs and railroads.

[2] Yet the institution persists. Indeed, not only does it persist, it flourishes. At a time when every major power, and indeed all but a handful of states on the planet, regard themselves as secular and when, according to the great sociologists of the past century and a half, religion should have lost most of its influence in the public arena, the papacy continues to play a significant role in shaping global politics.

[3] This essay is at once a *defense* of the papacy, an *analysis* of the political dynamics that have made it so difficult for the papacy to fulfill its vocation, and a *program* for the long-term future of the institution. Specifically, I will argue that not only the Catholic Church but also humanity in general desperately need an institution which joins prophetic wisdom with political power, and that the imperfections of the papacy result from the extraordinary difficulty of maintaining both the autonomy necessary both to stand up to unjust social structures and the political power to act effectively in the global political arena. The Church has relied too narrowly on the papacy as a guarantor of the Church's prophetic autonomy and political power. Only an institution strong in head and members can successfully stand up to the combined forces of unjust social structures and the ruling classes that benefit from them.

[4] In order to make this case it will be necessary, first, to explain the philosophical and theological rationale for the existence of the papacy. It will also be necessary to analyze briefly

the historical development of the institution, with specific reference to the various ways the Church has sought to endow it with both the autonomy to be prophetic and the power to be effective. This will point towards a brief outline of the principal strategic orientations of the papacy during the twentieth century and some reflections regarding the challenges facing the papacy in the present period.

The Philosophical and Theological Rational for the Existence of the Papacy

[5] According to the natural law tradition the basis for any sort of rule or authority lies in the human intellect, which is able to rise to a first principle in terms of which the universe can be explained and human action and human society ordered and which, on the basis of this principle, governs the other human faculties (Aquinas: 205-6). The purpose of rule or authority is to create the social conditions that promote human excellence, both individual and collective (Aristotle: 1108-12). All human beings possess an intellect and thus all have the capacity to participate in the governance of human communities. At the same time, it is also clear that some people have developed the specific virtues necessary for leadership – wisdom, prudence, justice, and fortitude – more fully than others. It is for this reason that the best forms of government combine both a democratic and an aristocratic element, so that laws are framed, as Isidore says, by the people and their elders together (Isidore in Aquinas: 207). Unjust social structures, furthermore, tend to undermine the ordinary development of human capacities, including the cultivation of the virtues necessary for leadership, making the conscious leadership of those who can and do cultivate these virtues all the more important.

[6] This approach to the problem of authority puts the Catholic tradition in a rather unusual position with respect to other trends in political philosophy. On the one hand, in so far as every human being has an intellect, the natural law approach is not at all incompatible with even the widest sort of democratic participation in the governance of either the Church or the State (Maritain). At the same time, what leaders (whether the members of a democratic assembly, an “aristocratic” council of presbyters, or a monarchic bishop or pope) *do* when they lead is not to *legislate* in the sense of making laws, but rather to *interpret* the natural law and *apply* it to the situation of concrete human communities (Aquinas: 227-28). The principles of natural law are themselves eternal and unchanging and require, in effect, that the public authorities promote the full development of human capacities. Just what specific laws are required to do this, however, changes radically with changing social conditions (Maritain). In the Catholic tradition, in other words, the work of *legislation* is actually an exercise of the *magisterium* or teaching office, carried out in consultation with the people as a whole. Communities will generally want to provide some regular mechanism for carrying out this work – for example a senate or council of elders which brings together the wisest members of the community and an assembly which provides a way of consulting the people and securing their consent – but it is the relative truth value of an interpretation which gives it the authority to order action, not the status of the person(s) making it or the process which was followed in arriving at it (Aquinas: 227-28).

[7] The fact that the Church rests not only on natural law but also on revealed wisdom does not change this basic dynamic (for an analysis of the nature of revelation and revealed wisdom see Mansueto 2002b). Revelation is given not only to the hierarchy but to the whole Church, and the work of interpreting it has never been the sole possession of any one person or institution. In the middle ages, for example, the *magisterium* was ordinarily exercised by philosophers and theologians, either individually or by vote of the relevant faculties of major universities, with the bishops intervening only when what they felt were serious errors arose. The most important

questions have been referred to Ecumenical Councils. Historically, this has most often meant councils of bishops, but there are both philosophical and theological reasons and historical precedents for including others. Political leaders and/or theologians, have, for example, been present at most councils to offer their expertise.

[8] The supreme exercise of the teaching office, however, occurs not in the definitive definition of a doctrine, but in bringing to light some new dimension of revealed truth, or in bringing the existing body of revealed wisdom to bear on new social conditions in such a way as to convey a radically new practical message. This is what we mean by *prophetic* leaders. Dante, for example, did not hesitate to assign a prophetic role to both Francis and Dominic, neither of whom were bishops and only one of whom was a priest. The Church has formally recognized this role by conferring on those it feels certain have exercised it the title of *doctor* of the Church. And the Church includes among its doctors an illiterate woman of the middle classes – Catherine of Siena. Such prophetic leaders have among their tasks teaching, challenging, and even correcting those in authority, including bishops and even popes. Catherine, for example, did not hesitate to take her hand to a recalcitrant pope the way a schoolteacher might, in previous days, have struck a disobedient pupil.

[9] There is, to be sure, more to the exercise of authority than simply teaching. Specifically, the Church has historically identified two other leadership functions: sanctification – helping others to cultivate virtue – and governing in the narrower sense of the term. The exercise of the sanctifying office is also widely dispersed and belongs to parents, friends, and spiritual directors who may be in any state of life as well as to those charged with one or another degree or dimension of the ministerial priesthood and thus with the sacramental life of the Church. There is no rationale for a monarchical office here.

[10] This means that if there is a place for a monarchical institution such as the papacy, it will lie in some aspect of the governing office. But what is left over for this office once we understand that the task of interpreting both natural law and revelation belong to the teaching office and are not the prerogative of any individual, no matter how wise? Governing may also mean implementing the policies arrived at by political or ecclesiastical councils on the basis of their interpretation of natural law and revealed wisdom. But this often requires specialized knowledge that is ordinarily the work of ministerial officers of various kinds, perhaps coordinated by a sort of prime minister and/or director-general. It is not the work of a monarch.

[11] Why then have a monarchic episcopacy, much less the global monarchical episcopacy we call the papacy? There are two things that a “king” can do that a council or a bureaucracy or even a “prime minister” cannot. First, kings set a standard of excellence – they lead by example. This is the origin of the notion that they represent, in some sense, the presence of the divine among us. Second, kings rally the people in the struggle against injustice, and lead them into battle.

[12] Now the first of these tasks is not controversial, whether it is demanded of religious leaders generally or of the pope in particular. It is, on the contrary, a role for the papacy that even many outside the Roman Catholic Church are prepared to accept, and a position to which many within the Church, displeased with the way in which one or more recent popes have exercised their office, would like to see the papacy reduced. It is only when the pope attempts to join prophecy to power and to stand up to real or perceived injustice that the papal monarchy becomes a controversial institution.

[13] Yet this specific way of joining prophecy to power is deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition. On the one hand, the natural law tradition vests the ordinary governance of communities in those communities themselves. Political power needs no baptism by the Church in order to be legitimate. Catholicism is not a hierocratic religion. On the other hand, human communities often fall under oppressive rulers who will not listen to the voices of the prophets, or even under oppressive systems that leave people unable to hear those voices. And unlike some other traditions, Catholicism is optimistic enough about our ability to know what is true and good – and to do it – to take the risk of creating an institution which, while not exercising anything like full sovereignty¹ over human communities, has enough power to force oppressors to listen, or provide the rallying point that the people need to overthrow them. It is for this reason that the popes have rightly claimed the authority, if and when rulers govern unjustly, to declare specific acts contrary to natural law and thus invalid and, if necessary, to dissolve the bonds between the people and their rulers, in effect sanctioning a revolution (e.g., Gregory VII; see Barry).²

Political-Economic Factors Shaping the Institution

[14] The question, of course, is just how to make such an institution work. There are, broadly speaking, two distinct aspects to this task which, unfortunately, are deeply and profoundly at odds with each other. On the one hand, being politically effective, especially on a global scale, requires considerable wealth and power. On the other hand, standing up to injustice requires autonomy. And this autonomy must be not just *relational*; it must be *structural*. By this I mean that the pope must not just have his own economic and political base, so that he is not dependent on the very ruling classes he must confront, but that he must have a distinctly different sort of economic and political base, which does not depend on the systematic exploitation of the poor, so that he does not himself become an oppressor even as he defends the poor against others who would oppress them. If the pope lacks the economic and political resources to affect policy on a global scale, then there is very little point in having a pope at all. But if the pope's economic and political base either ties him to the ruling classes or makes him a member of the ruling classes, then he is unlikely to be very prophetic at all.

[15] Historically, this has turned out to be a very difficult problem to solve. It was, in all probability, only the effective collapse of imperial authority in the West that allowed what we understand by the papacy to emerge. In the East, once the Empire legalized Christianity and then adopted it as the official state religion, the bishops were increasingly reduced to the status of state officials, with the Patriarch of Constantinople having the status of a very senior cabinet

¹ Indeed, Catholic political thought is incompatible with the whole of idea of sovereignty, understood as absolute authority over a territory and its people. As Jacques Maritain has demonstrated, the whole idea of sovereignty presupposes the idea that there can be aspect of a system (whether monarch, party, or people) that simultaneously stands outside that system and governs it from above.

² This doctrine was developed in the context of the religiously relatively homogenous European society of the Middle Ages, and so does not address the question of religious pluralism. In so far as the authority in question, however, is based in natural law rather than in revelation, any consistent Catholic political theory would need to extend comparable authority to leaders from other wisdom traditions, perhaps acting in council if their decisions had bearing on a religiously mixed population. This is a point that, to my knowledge, has not yet been adequately addressed. It should also be noted that the unjust rulers in question may be the people themselves, as well as their supposed representatives, a ruling political party, or an individual, whether tyrant or legitimate king.

minister.³ The Eastern Fathers delivered some powerful denunciations of private property, but a careful analysis of the political valence of these statements suggests that such denunciations were very much in accord with imperial policy, which was always trying to reduce the large landowners to the status of a service nobility dependent on the state. Denunciations of the Empire itself, which had an oppressive tax policy that weighed heavily on the poor, were far less common. Those in the Orthodox Church who have wanted the Church to play a critical role with respect to society have tended either to argue that the Church should eschew property and worldly power altogether (e.g. the Old Believers) or have developed strong Uniate tendencies, recognizing the authority of the pope while retaining distinctive liturgical rites. Consider the case of Vladimir Solovyov, who some believe was received into the Roman Catholic Church on his deathbed.

[16] In the West the popes began to develop authority in the political realm first because of their role in defending their see against the Germanic invaders, and then in moderating the destructive impact of those invasions on the peoples of central Italy. Gradually, a stalemate emerged and the Germanic tribes realized that they could rule more effectively with the support of the Church than without it, and began to seek the patronage of both local bishops and of the pope as a form of political legitimation. This process culminated with the establishment of the so-called Holy Roman Empire under the Frankish warlord Charlemagne. The idea was that in return for crowning the emperor and thus legitimating his rule, the pope secured the protection of this “chief warlord” for the Church and, presumably, for its values.

[17] The difficulty, of course, was that this arrangement was understood very differently by each of the parties involved. Pope Gelasius, for example, taught that all authority flowed from God to the pope. The pope delegated spiritual authority to the bishops and political authority to the emperor and to his subordinate lords – and could revoke that authority if they did not rule justly. The Holy Roman Emperors, on the other hand, as well as other great lords, claimed that their authority came directly from God and regarded the bishops and even the pope as at best possessing a separate, spiritual authority and in some cases as merely their ministers in the care and governance of the Church (Goerner). The support of the Church was, in any case, too critically important to the legitimation strategy of the feudal elites to be left to chance. Soon every warlord worth his salt had (depending on his resources) his own priest, abbot, bishop, whose support was secured by means of benefices with which the cleric in question was invested not by his canonical superior or elector(s) – the bishop, or in the case of prelates, the chapter of the abbey or cathedral – but rather by the secular warlord. And prelaties, whether monastic or lay, soon became the province of the younger sons of the nobility, so that the ecclesiastical hierarchy found itself less and less an autonomous, prophetic force in society and more and more a subordinate branch of the feudal “aristocracy.”

[18] It was, in large measure, in the context of a struggle against these abuses that the medieval popes developed from ordinary bishops, whose power derived primarily from the ancient prestige of their see, into political actors on a European scale. Reforming popes such as Gregory the VII and Innocent III fought vigorously but not always successfully to wrest from the warlords and especially from the emerging monarchs the right to name bishops and thus to have in place local religious leaders who could challenge the warlords when their rapacity exceeded

³ For a good picture of the transformation of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire into a Christian Sacral Monarchy consider Eusebius's *Orations on Constantine*, quoted in Ruether: 142 and Cunningham: 51.

customary bounds. These reform bishops were, furthermore, encouraged to build and defend an independent economic and political base so as to be less dependent on the economic favor of the ruling classes. The difficulty is that while this gave bishops and abbots a measure of *relational* autonomy, it did not really give them *structural* autonomy. They became, in effect, great feudal landowners themselves. There is good reason to believe that their estates were administered less brutally and that the revenues generated were used in ways which better served the community than those of most feudal lords, but the fact remains that they were *structurally* quite similar, if not identical, to secular estates.⁴

[19] The rise of the mendicant orders, which Innocent III supported, was in large measure an attempt to break this pattern, but the economic and political realities proved overwhelming. Renouncing ownership of landed estates meant either a radical poverty that prevented an effective engagement with an increasingly complex culture, or else dependence on contributions by large donors and thus a return to relational dependence on the ruling classes. The dilemma is familiar to nonprofit managers today.

[20] Closely associated with these institutional reform movements was the rise of new theologies that stressed the prophetic role of the Church, which was increasingly envisioned not simply as a means of salvation and a defender of the poor against the worst forms of exploitation, but as a real force for social transformation. These theologies fell into two broad camps. On the Franciscan side Francis' embrace of poverty was transformed from an individual spiritual discipline into a political option for the poor. Radical Franciscans embraced the prophetic vision of the Calabrese abbot Joachim of Fiore, who had predicted that the rise of two new religious orders would usher in a "Third Age of the Holy Spirit" that would bring to an end the second age of priests and kings, and in which everyone would live in what amounted to monastic communities under the leadership of a Spiritual Father. The Spiritual Franciscan rejection of property threatened the ability of the Church to carry out its mission and drew down the wrath of the popes, but rather commended them to the Holy Roman Emperors (Reeves 1976, McGinn)⁵. The Dominicans, on the other hand, embraced the new Aristotelian philosophy imported from *Dar-al-Islam*, and eventually developed a political philosophy which both recognized the relative autonomy of the secular authorities *and* upheld the role of the Pope as guardian of both natural law and revealed wisdom (Goerner).

[21] In the meanwhile, however, profound changes were taking place in European society which further complicated the task of assuring the papacy both autonomy and power. After a long period of growth and development, Europe began running up against land shortages in the middle of the twelfth century. These land shortages affected the warlords in particular, since the

⁴ Sarell Everett Gleason, however, found no evidence of serfdom on the estates of the Bishop of Bayeux between 1066 and 1204, even though his diocese was located in Normandy, in the "heartland" of classical feudalism. Conditions in the Diocese of Lucca in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were, if anything, even more favorable for the peasantry (Osheim).

⁵ A case might be made that there was at the very least a strong "elective affinity" between late medieval Franciscan philosophy and theology and imperial power. As John Milbank and others have argued, the Scotist doctrine of the univocity of being makes the distinction between the human and the divine fundamentally quantitative and one of power. God is infinite; we are finite. This in turn leads to a voluntarist ethics founded on God's command, rather than on the nature of things themselves, i.e. their created share in God's act of Being, as for Aquinas. This is rather more coherent with an understanding of political power as imperium (command) than with the complex and nuanced doctrine of Aquinas in which power is always subordinate to the teaching and sanctifying functions.

laws of primogeniture meant that the younger sons of the nobility were left landless unless the lords for whom they fought as knights bachelor were able to conquer new lands to grant them as fiefs. This created an expansionist dynamic that bore fruit in the Crusades, the *Reconquista*, and eventually in the conquest of Africa, the Americas, and Asia. These conquests at once strengthened the emerging monarchies, which claimed for the first time full sovereignty over entire territories and their peoples, and set in motion the process of capitalist development, first opening up to Europe trade routes once controlled by *Dar-al-Islam* and eventually flooding Europe with African gold and American silver, which allowed the relatively backward Europeans to buy into the Silk Road Trade and begin the primitive accumulation of capital that eventually made possible the Industrial Revolution .

[22] Papal authority represented a real obstacle to the development of both capitalism and the modern nation state. The marketplace, after all, is agnostic regarding substantive questions of value and “knows” only supply and demand. The vast lands held by the Church in mortmain, which the peasantry cultivated on relatively favorable terms, almsgiving which reduced pressure on the landless to seek work in the cities, restrictions on usury, and the limitations placed by the Church on private property, which was understood as a trust from the community – and ultimately from God – to be used for the common good, all stood in the way of the full development of capitalist relations of production. Monarchs, similarly, resented the exclusion of the clergy and the religious orders from civil jurisdiction, ancient rights such as sanctuary that limited the reach of royal justice, and most especially the notion that their authority derived from and was subject to that of the popes.

[23] The way in which this process played itself out varied considerably from one country to another. In Spain, and to a lesser extent in the Spanish Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, for example, where a modern state emerged as a result of the larger process of the Crusades and *Reconquista*, the monarchy was too closely identified with the Church to give serious consideration to breaking with Rome. Instead, the Spanish crown sought and obtained special rights, nominally in return for its service in the struggle against Islam – rights that included the operation of its own Inquisition that was far more brutal and repressive than Rome’s own Holy Office. This special relationship with Rome passed from Spain through the Hapsburgs to Austria, which inherited, in the process, the now little more than honorific title to the Holy Roman Empire. The same was true in France where, since the time of Charlemagne, the monarchy had been the historic defender of the papacy, but which now sought special “Gallican Freedoms” which made the local Church subservient to the crown. Where geopolitical factors set local monarchies and bourgeoisies in tension with these great “Catholic powers,” as in England, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany, the result was the more complete break with Rome that we call the Reformation.

[24] In either case, however, the effect was the same: the secularization and capitalization of church lands, the suppression of monasteries, and the gradual erosion of ecclesiastical immunities, exemptions, and the right of sanctuary (Chadwick). Closely aligned with these institutional changes was a global theological change that might best be described as an Augustinian Reaction. Beginning as early as 1270, Stephen Tempier, Bishop of Paris and a *de facto* agent of the French King, issued condemnations of “Radical Aristotelian” propositions that included a number held by Thomas Aquinas. Over the course of the next several hundred years, even as the papacy struggled to uphold the vision of Thomas and the Order of Preachers, theologians at universities increasingly under the control of local monarchies and bourgeoisies

turned to a pessimistic Augustinianism which stressed the sovereignty of God (reflex, on the one hand, of the supposed sovereignty of the king and, on the other hand, of the inscrutable operation of market forces), the dependence of the world on God, the radical sinfulness and dependence of human nature, and a divine command ethics which made law the result of divine decree rather than of the internal dynamism of nature. The Reformation was merely the most radical expression of this theological trend. Oxford Franciscanism and such later movements as Gallicanism, Josephism, Jansenism, and ontologism all reflected, in one degree or another, the same emphases (Mansueto 1995, 2002a, 2002b; Chadwick).

[25] It is not surprising that, in this situation, defenders of the autonomy of the Church as guardian of natural law and as a prophetic voice in an unjust society would have turned once again to the papacy as the centerpiece of their strategy for resistance. This was especially true of the Society of Jesus, which played a leading role in the struggle against the worst aspects of colonialism and imperialism.⁶ The idea was, quite simply, that if the Church was to effectively resist the forces of capitalist modernization and defend both the European peasantry and artisanate and the indigenous peoples of the Americas against the predations of absolutism and capitalism, it needed its own state and its own monarch, as absolute within the Church as the kings of England, Spain, and France were within their own realms. Only such a papacy could credibly re-assert its autonomy and play a prophetic role in the modern world. It is this strategic commitment to the papacy that has led the Society of Jesus to submit to the popes even when they have acted against the Society's interests, as has not infrequently been the case.

[26] But creating an absolutist papacy proved to be a difficult task. The autonomy of the popes was insured in large part by means of their temporal power over the Papal States. This meant that the papacy was an Italian state on the modern absolutist model as well as, if not more so than, a universal ecclesial institution. And Italian states were (with the partial exception of the Piemontese "Kingdom of Sardinia", which was created as a buffer state between France and Austria, and which thus enjoyed a favorable position within the international balance of power) dependent states. In the case of the papacy, this meant effective subjection to the "protection" of the other Catholic powers. This meant that these states enjoyed a *de facto* veto in selection of popes, exercised through their own national cardinals. It is not surprising that the popes elected provided only very feeble resistance to the process of capitalist modernization, consenting to further secularization and capitalization of Church lands, erosion of exemptions and immunities, and suppression of monasteries. The rare popes who were seriously committed to playing a prophetic role also tended towards an otherworldly sanctity that made them reluctant to defend the worldly interests of the Church; those who were worldly enough to understand the importance of the economic and political position of the Church were generally less prophetic and more closely aligned with the rest of the European ruling classes (Chadwick).

[27] It was this situation that brought the papacy face to face with the Italian national movement or *Risorgimento*. Like the Italic peoples generally, the papacy, if it was to carry out its vocation, had to liberate itself from the tutelage of Austria and France. This led some thinkers – the so-called Neo-Guelphs – to imagine that the papacy might lead the Italian national liberation

⁶ For evidence that the Jesuits saw the papacy as a counterweight to emerging absolutism, consider, for example, the political theology of Bellarmine, which amounts to a Catholic answer to the doctrine of the divine right of kings advanced by James I of England. For evidence that the Jesuits were involved in resistance to capitalist development, consider the Jesuit reductions in Paraguay, which (whatever other problems they many have had) protected the Indians that settled in them from insertion into the process of primitive capitalist accumulation.

struggle at the head of a confederation of the already existing Italian states. This strategy was generally favored by Catholic thinkers in the North, and especially Piemonte, and was associated with a larger philosophical movement known as ontologism and with rationalist trends in theology generally.

[28] When Pius IX refused to take this path, it proved a great disappointment to Catholic liberals worldwide, and served as “proof” to the anticlerical left of the irreducibly reactionary character of the papacy, which was willing to sacrifice its own autonomy and that of the Italian people, in order to protect the narrowest of temporal interests – essentially those of the nobility of the papal states from which the popes were generally drawn, as well as those of the hierarchy generally and the *curia* in particular. This presupposed, however, that the *Risorgimento* was a fundamentally progressive movement ordered to the common good. There is, however, good reason to question this perspective.

[29] Becoming, in effect, the constitutional monarch of a unified Italian state was, first, incompatible with the prophetic vocation of the papacy, which required it to become less rather than more identified with specifically Italian interests. Second, the *Risorgimento* was foremost a conquest of the South by the North (Zitara) and of the countryside by the city (Sereni), in the interests of the primitive accumulation of capital and the commodification of social relationships. As elsewhere, these processes proceeded at the expense of the peasantry and the Church, which not surprisingly made common cause against it (for a more extended treatment of this question see Mansueto 1995, 2002a; Sereni; Zitara). The popes’ stand against the *Risorgimento* was, in other words, a stand with the poorest and most oppressed sectors of Italian society.

[30] The same is true of the papacy’s rejection of the Catholic rationalism that provided the philosophical and theological foundation for the Neo-Guelph movement. The rationalists argued that human reason can rise not only to knowledge that God exists, and of certain divine attributes (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, the identity of God with the transcendental properties of Being) but also to either a vision of Being as such or to a rational comprehension of revealed truth. The first variant was characteristic of ontologism, which was common in Italy and Belgium. The more moderate strains of ontologism, such as that developed by Piemontese philosopher Antonio Rosmini, who has enjoyed a recent resurgence of favor within the Church, argue simply that Being is the first object of the intellect and that, in so far as God is Being as such, human knowledge begins with knowledge of God. Rosmini stresses, however, that this is not a real vision of the divine essence, but rather only of the common Being shared by all things. More radical forms of ontologism, such as that developed by Gioberti (one of the important leaders of the Neo-Guelph movement), argue that human beings do indeed have direct knowledge of the divine essence, with the implication that we thus also have the knowledge necessary to participate in democratic self-government. The second variant of the Catholic rationalism was associated with the Tübingen school and drew on Hegelian philosophy to argue that even revealed truths as the Trinity could be comprehended and shown to be rationally necessary (McCool 1977, 1994).

[31] Both of these tendencies, because they give so much to reason, were seen as liquidating the role of the clergy generally, and the hierarchy in particular. But this should not be understood to mean that they empowered the people as a whole. Rationalism was the ideology of the Catholic bourgeoisie, anxious to free itself and its state from clerical supervision that might get in the way of modernization and capitalist development and to gain within the Church something like the democratic “citizenship” they enjoyed in the state. Yielding to the rationalists would, in effect,

have given control of the Church to the bourgeoisie and made it impossible to stand against Capital.

[32] It should, furthermore, be noted that while the Church rejected rationalism in this period, it even more decisively rejected the principal ideology of Reaction – the Traditionalism of de Maistre and de Bonald. Traditionalism emerged as a response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Against the claim of Descartes and his followers to derive all knowledge from analytically self-evident first principles, the traditionalists insisted that human knowledge was a social product, based on concepts embedded in language, which constitute a sort of primitive revelation shared by all human beings. This understanding of human civilization as the product of divine revelation extended to social institutions –including the economic privileges of the feudal or ex-feudal “nobility” and (not always consistently) the authority of both the absolutist monarchies that emerged at the end of the middle ages and the popes. The effect was to put the kings and the warlord “aristocracy” on a par with the clergy as agents of God. This was the ideology par excellence of the Restoration regimes that put themselves forward as defenders of the Church and especially of the popes, but did so only at a price. Specifically, they claimed for kings not only the direct mandate from God which the Imperialist philosophers of the middle ages had claimed for the Holy Roman Emperor, but also a radical permanence which those philosophers had not. The fact that the papacy was itself regarded as an institution established by divine revelation notwithstanding, this made traditionalism an unattractive option for the papacy, which had always claimed the right to depose unjust rulers, but it nonetheless had significant influence and probably a majority of the bishops present at the first Vatican Council had some traditionalist sympathies (Heyer; Thibault; Chadwick). The doctrine of papal infallibility proclaimed by the Council can be read either as an attempt to construct a papal absolutism along traditionalist lines as a bulwark for the ancient regime (which is probably how most of its supporters understood it) or as an attempt on the part of the papacy to assert its authority vis-à-vis the traditionalists, which is how Pius IX understood it.⁷ Ultimately, however, the Council condemned the principal traditionalist thesis – fideism – which holds that knowledge of God is possible only on the basis of faith (Vatican I).

[33] The papacy opted instead, against the combined force of the Restorationist aristocracy and the liberal bourgeoisie, for a third alternative: a Social Catholicism that bound the destiny of the clergy to the working classes and the peasantry. This Social Catholicism was grounded by Neo-Thomism, a philosophical and theological tendency that was, in the early nineteenth century, marginal at best.

[34] Despite the honor accorded the person of Thomas in the period following his death, key Thomistic doctrines were condemned by the Church in 1270 and 1277, and Thomistic philosophy and theology generally were eclipsed by the Augustinian Reaction which lasted until the time of the Counter-Reformation. The struggle against the radical Augustinianism of the Reformers led to the development of a Second Thomism during the sixteenth century, but this was largely abandoned after the scientific revolution undercut the Aristotelian cosmology on which Thomistic metaphysics depended – and after the rise of the Absolutist state made Thomistic doctrines of the “indirect power” of the papacy politically suspect. As late as the

⁷ When the Dominican General Guidi offered the council a compromise text that recognized the infallibility of the pope’s dogmatic definitions, rather than of his person, and under the condition that these definitions were consistent with the Catholic tradition, Pius IX responded by saying “La tradizione son’io!” (in Heyer: 191).

1830s and 1840s, even within the Society of Jesus, which would become, along with the Order of Preachers, the principal force for its revival, Thomists were subjected to periodic repression and “exile” from the principal intellectual centers of the order (Thibault: 31, 33). Yet, in 1879, with the promulgation of the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, Thomism was declared the official philosophical and theological doctrine of the Catholic Church, its principal rivals having been condemned in, among other documents, the Dogmatic Constitution *De Fide* of the First Vatican Council.

[35] What might account for the rapid rise of the “third” Thomism? While there have been a number of historical accounts of Neo-Thomism and its struggle with its rivals (cf. for example, McCool 1989, 1994) only one, as far as I can tell, attempts a sociohistorical explanation: Paul Thibault’s *Savoir et Pouvoir*. Even this explanation tends to emphasize intra-ecclesial factors. Thibault argues that traditionalism represented the alliance between altar and throne which characterized the Restoration period, and ontologism and German Idealism, with their emphasis on the powers of human reason, reflected the emergence of an independent university based cadre of Catholic philosophers and theologians. Neo-Thomism, with its sharp distinction between a rational apologetic, which established the reasonableness of revelation, and a revealed supernatural which remained forever beyond comprehension, and the understanding of which is thus dependent on the interpretive activity of the hierarchical magisterium, was ideally adapted to the needs of a church, and especially a hierarchy and a papacy anxious to reassert their authority in the wake of the loss of its temporal power.

[36] What Thibault misses is the fact that the third Thomism pointed to an entirely new way of grounding the autonomy of the Church generally, and the papacy in particular. Thomism had never favored the direct temporal power of the popes, but rather what it called the “indirect power.” Political authority is based on the exercise of reason in interpreting the natural law – something in which every human being can participate, if not in equal degrees. Political authority thus needs no blessing from the Church to be legitimate. And in so far as political authority is based on reason, something every human being possesses, there is no reason why that authority cannot be democratic in character. What the Church does is, on the one hand, to serve as a channel of the grace which creates in us supernatural capacities – the ability to love God and neighbor for their own sake and not only for what they contribute to our development – and to serve as a guardian of natural law. Thus Thomists historically taught that the pope, or even the local ordinary, could declare particular laws invalid because they violated natural law, and dissolve the bonds between an unjust ruler and his subjects. This is quite different from actually exercising “state power” or using the modern state to enforce religious norms.

[37] Neo-Thomism, in other words, offered something both to those anxious to strengthen the prophetic vocation of the Church and to those anxious to reinforce clerical authority, and did so in a way which, particularly when the doctrine is viewed against the background of its competitors, and particularly in the light of the Jesuit commitment to the papacy as the principal instrument of the Church’s prophetic office, made it difficult to distinguish between these two functions. Like earlier Thomisms, it upheld and, with *Rerum Novarum* and eventually with the development of Social Catholicism and Christian Democracy began to exercise in an entirely new way, the “indirect authority” of the Pope over political communities. The popes learned to discipline governments by appealing directly to the people, who in turn bore the responsibility for acting in the public arena to promote justice.

The Present Period

[38] The question, of course, is just how effective this new strategy has been. The greatest successes were at the level of the *magisterium* itself. The new strategy provided ecclesiastical sponsorship for a new generation of Thomistic philosophers and theologians who combined ethical critiques of capitalism which focused on the inability of the market, because of its agnosticism regarding values and its irreducible individualism, to promote the full development of human capacities, with a critique of the whole concept of “sovereignty” shared by capitalists and socialists alike, and defended the principle of subsidiarity against the hegemonic claims of the state, be it liberal or socialist (Maritain). This same line of reasoning led the Church to become one of the most potent advocates of international governance, something that was reflected in the call in *Pacem in Terris* for an effective international political authority.

[39] These theoretical developments were not without practical results. Social Catholics played an important role in the labor movement. They can take particular credit for the greater protections that artisans, shopkeepers, and peasants enjoy in Europe by comparison with the United States. They played the leading role in the constitution of the first effective international political authority – the European Union.

[40] This said, there were also some real failures. The Church was slow in supporting the development of Catholic lay movements and Christian Democratic parties, insisted on clerical control of those movements, and always gave first priority to defending clerical interests. The Church’s record during World War II was nothing short of scandalous. It was only after the Second World War that Social Catholicism became politically effective, and even then the promise of a “third way” distinct from capitalism and socialism was never realized, or rather tended to be reduced to a moderate social democracy friendly to church interests on questions of education and family law. Christian Democratic parties, rather than representing the authentic alternative to both capitalism and socialism which they imagined themselves to be, became instead an instrument of U.S. anticommunist strategy in the postwar period. Within the Church the Thomists did little or nothing to advance the position of women or to come to terms with an increasingly literate laity anxious to participate more actively in the internal life of the Church as well as to engage in the “social apostolate” assigned to them by Neo-Thomistic ecclesiology. The educated middle strata of society were increasingly abandoning the Church as a *religious* institution even if they often voted for Catholic parties in elections.

[41] The Second Vatican Council was largely a result of broad based recognition of these failures. There was, however, no unified analysis of the problems facing the Church, much less a unified solution. The emerging liberationist Left regarded Neo-Thomism and Social Catholicism as too cautious, giving the defense of clerical authority priority over alliance with the people. They opted for a left-wing Augustinianism reminiscent of the Franciscan Spirituals who met God foremost in the poor, something which not only legitimated, but actually sacralized, the struggles for national liberation and socialism which characterized the latter part of the twentieth century, and which made the poor themselves (or their revolutionary leaders) rather than the clergy the principal mediators of divine revelation.⁸ At the same time a new Augustinian Right emerged

⁸ For a detailed argument on why I believe liberation theology was Augustinian, see Mansueto 2002a. The argument turns on the fact that liberation theologians ground action on behalf of social justice not on natural law but on Jesus’ identification with the poor. This is not to say that a Thomistic theology which grounded Catholic support for the movements towards national liberation and socialism of the late twentieth century would have been impossible. Partly it may not have developed because such a theology would have made the liberationist reliance on Marxism

which regarded Neo-Thomism and Social Catholicism as too focused on the social apostolate and ineffective in communicating what they saw as the essential message of Christianity: human sinfulness and God's offer of forgiveness. This group, which developed around the journal *Communio*, and which includes both the current pope and his chief theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, but of whom the most important theological representative was Hans Urs von Balthasar, explicitly rejects both the "cosmological" approach of historic Thomism, which rises to God through an attempt to explain the natural world, and the "anthropological" approach of the conciliar (and in a different way the liberation) theologians, in favor of an "aesthetic" approach which gives priority to the passive reception of the self-sacrificial gift of Christ on the cross. The effect is a sort of clericalized Lutheranism which brings to the very center of Christian doctrine the male high priest whom women can never image, and whose priesthood, therefore they can never enter, and which treats those who concern themselves with social justice as "Judaizers," marking the profound anti-Semitism of this trend. In between, what emerged as the centrist trend, of which Rahner was probably the most important representative, moved back towards ontologism by making knowledge of God, understood as "Esse as such" a "nonthematic pre-apprehension" which is behind all of our judgments. (What this means is that whenever we predicate anything, we use the verb "to be" and thus make implicit reference to the actual power of Being, which is God.) Rahner later went on to argue that it was also quite possible for people to become "implicit Christians" without specifically either hearing or affirming the Christian gospel. The result, in both cases, is to weaken the distinction between reason and revelation and natural and supernatural and thus the distinction between clergy and laity – precisely what was being demanded by a broad segment of the increasingly literate Catholic middle classes who met God in their own internal experience, without benefit of either philosophical instruction or priestly mediation.

[42] The result of these developments has been not only to divide the Church, but to render it impotent. The conciliar theology, like other bourgeois Augustinianisms before it, so defers to the private judgments of literate laity drawn from the middle and upper middle strata of society as to undermine the prophetic office of the Church.⁹ Liberation theology, while it persists as a significant current in Latin America and to a lesser extent in Asia and Africa, lost its political bearings with the crisis of socialism and, having rejected in principle the idea of a distinctly Catholic "third way" proposed by the Christian Democrats, is unable to offer much in the way of a concrete alternative to capitalist globalization. The *Communio* trend, which became dominant

more apparent, with Marx supplementing the role played by Aristotle in Thomistic philosophy and theology, a suggestion made quite explicitly by Dom Helder Camara. Anxious to avoid identification with Marxism, especially after 1978, many liberationists used biblical rather than philosophical language, something that led them, perhaps unconsciously, towards Augustinianism. Liberationists, furthermore, not only rejected the specifics of Christian Democratic programs, but rejected in principle the idea of a distinctively Catholic politics in favor of support for what was often called "the peoples' own project of liberation," i.e. socialism. This tendency to sacralize the poor directly, rather than to argue philosophically and theologically for the aims for which they were struggling, tended to pull in the direction of a left-wing, Franciscan, Augustinianism.

⁹ The difficulty here is not the lay status of the individuals involved, but rather their class position. The period since the Second World War generally, and the period since 1980 in particular, has witnessed the development of a very large and highly privileged class of "professionals" and managers. Because of their privileged position, they are less likely than earlier intelligentsias to challenge the global hegemony of capital from which they derive significant benefit. Because of the overwhelmingly technical character of their education, they are even less capable than earlier intelligentsias of actually approaching philosophical and theological questions.

after the election of Karol Wojtyła in 1978, seems intent (and Ratzinger has said as much) on purging the Church of all who do not accept their particular theology, leaving only a “remnant” which is impotent because of both its reduced size and its theology. As Pope John Paul II, Wojtyła has given this trend a popular public face, and has taken the strategy of papal leadership by means of direct appeal to the people to new lengths. Except for his early success in catalyzing the emergence of mass resistance to Soviet rule in Eastern Europe, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc (something which ultimately played directly into the hands of the liberal capitalists of whom he claims, at least, to be as critical as he was of the socialists), he has had little success in affecting either the public policies of the great powers or the private morality of individual Catholics. As his pontificate comes to a close, the Church finds itself once again in a state of profound crisis. The strategy of papal leadership by means of direct appeal to the people remains sound, but its application requires fundamental revision if it is to help the papacy realize its potential as a force for social justice and spiritual development on a global scale.

[43] It is necessary, first of all, to recognize that even in the Third World, the laity to which the papacy appeals is no longer the illiterate peasantry and working class and the barely educated petty bourgeoisie and lower bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. All around the world there is a mass movement of grassroots theological reflection of which the theology of liberation was only one expression. The Church has always recognized that every human being possesses reason and thus the right to participate in making decisions. Now humanity is developing that capacity on a mass scale. The Church has also always recognized that revelation, and new insights into revelation, are given not only to the hierarchy but to the people as a whole. Those people now want to understand the deposit of faith and to be actively engaged in its interpretation.

[44] This does not mean that there is no longer room for conscious leadership. It is just that that leadership must now take a different form. It is vitally important, first, to provide opportunities for the people to become authentically literate philosophically and theologically. This means supporting what amounts to universal access to liberal arts education, with a very strong philosophical and theological component, on a global scale for those who desire it. It also means that in order to lead a more literate laity, the clergy will have to be far better formed intellectually than has thus far been the case. We need ordinary parish priests who (however humble and unassuming their outward demeanor) are the clear intellectual superiors of their technocrat parishioners, both in terms of their underlying capacity and in terms of the scope and breadth of their education. Only then will what they teach have real respect. This must be even more true of the higher clergy. While the responsibility of governing requires prudence as well as wisdom, bishops must be in close dialogue with philosophers and theologians, who must for their part feel free to teach in accord with their consciences and to engage their bishops in open debate. Any bishop who cannot consistently win public disputations on this basis of clear and overwhelming intellectual superiority has no business being a bishop and should retire. The *magisterium*, in other words, must be an authentic teaching office, not an office which constantly issues pronouncements about what not to teach, but which is unable to make basic doctrine credible and comprehensible to a literate laity.

[45] The religious aspirations of the people are not, however, only intellectual. There is also a global mass movement of people seeking authentic spiritual development. Much of what they get, however, both from the Catholic clergy and from “freelance” providers is emotional mush. While remaining open to learning from other traditions, the Church needs to actively teach the great tradition of Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila and lead the people

through the dark nights which alone lead to authentic mystical union. This means, once again, having a clergy which does not merely *claim* sanctity, but which is *actually* more developed than the laity. The priesthood must cease to be a refuge for young men fleeing sexual and career difficulties and become a calling so challenging that it attracts only those who seek a truly difficult life. And this must, once again, be even more true of bishops. Those who ordain people to carry out the work of sanctification must themselves be in a position to judge their candidates, and this requires that they, in turn, be *overwhelmingly* more developed spiritually than those they judge.

[46] The people are, finally, crying out for leaders who will raise the standard and advance before them into battle against the numerous injustices of the present period. The Church must return to the work it began with the Catholic Action movement and which the liberationists extended with the creation of base communities. Both movements trained whole generations of grassroots leaders for trade unions and community organizations. Those who train these leaders and those who rise to positions of public leadership need not be clergy, since the ordinary work of political leadership belongs to the laity. But it *is* necessary that the clergy understand political power if it is to hold the public authorities accountable before the court of natural law. Those who fear conflict or who find it incompatible with their spiritual paths have no place in public ministry. This work must be carried out at all levels. Parish priests must hold accountable businessmen in their parishes who fail to pay a living wage, warning them privately first, then publicly, and eventually barring them from communion. Where this does not work, they must lead the people in dispossessing them. Bishops must do the same with the corporate leaders in their dioceses. Politicians who reduce the taxes of the rich at the expense of the poor and wage unjust wars must expect the same treatment – as should the soldiers who fight unjust wars.¹⁰ The ruling classes cannot stand before an empowered Church prepared to call the people into effective action against injustice.

[47] It goes without saying that a Church which is looking for the very best leaders will not turn people away because of gender, or because they find marriage a help to their calling rather than a hindrance, or because they choose to be open about the sexual orientation they share with many of today's priests and bishops.

[48] It might be asked what all this has to do with the papacy. The answer is simple. It is not possible to rely exclusively on the popes to lead the struggle against nihilism, despair, and injustice. This was the mistake of the Counter-Reformation, and it was only partially corrected by Leo XIII. If the Church is to effectively confront the problems of the modern world, she must be strong in head and members. There must be a vast cadre of intellectually, morally, and politically powerful leaders from whom truly prophetic and kingly popes can be elected, who will stand behind such popes and be ready to replace them when they fall – because they will. The Church must have millions ready to lead in a way which makes the greatest saints of the past seem insignificant by comparison.

[49] This said, candidates for the office of supreme pontiff must meet all the qualifications identified above, but in even higher degree. They must be intellectual leaders of the first rank, and have a record of major philosophical and theological contributions that significantly advance

¹⁰ There is recent precedent for action of this sort. A Carmelite superior told my wife that while serving a parish in New Jersey, he had occasion to refuse communion to Zbigniew Brezhinski for his advocacy of an unjust foreign policy.

humanity's understanding of fundamental questions of meaning and value. Indeed, they must be the very best intellectual leaders the Church has to offer. They must be spiritually developed to confront unjust moneymakers and tyrants. They must be able to build and exercise power without being captured by the power they wield. And they must be brilliant strategic and tactical leaders capable of using the Church's power for the good of the Church and humanity.

[50] The next pope will not be like this. He will lack the wisdom, the prudence, and the fortitude to lead his people out of the present darkness. And if he were like this, he would be struck down and there would be none to replace him. But the next pope can take the first steps. He can begin building up the body so that, in a generation or two, when humanity will need it most, it can hold its head high.

Bibliography

Alighieri, Dante

1969a *De Monarchia*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill

1969b *Commedia*. Translated as *The Divine Comedy* and with commentary by Sinclair, John D., New York: Oxford University Press.

Aristotle

1941 *The Basic Works*. Edited and with an Introduction by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House.

Aquinas, Thomas

1952 *Summa Theologiae*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Barry OSB, Colman J., editor

1960 *Readings in Church History. Volume One: From Pentecost to the Protestant Revolt*. New York: Newman.

Bellarmino, Robert

1949 *The Power of the Pope in temporal affairs, against William Barclay*. Translated and edited by George Albert Moore. Chevy Chase, Md., Country Dollar.

Bonald, Louis de

1965 *Théorie du pouvoir, politique et religieuse*. Paris, Union générale d'éditions.

Chadwick, Owen

1981 *The Popes and the European Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Colapietra, Raffaele

1963 *La chiesa tra Lammenais e Metternich*. Brescia: Morelliana.

Cunningham, Agnes, editor and translator

1982 *The Early Church and the State*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Gleason, Sarell Everett

- 1936 *An Ecclesiastical Barony of the Middle Ages: The Bishopric of Bayeux, 1066-1204*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Goerner, E. A.

- 1965 *Peter and Caesar*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Hales, Edward

- 1954 *Pio Nonno*. New York: Kennedy.

Heyer, Friedrich

- 1969 *The Catholic Church: 1648-1870*. London: Adam and Charles Beck.

Maistre, Joseph de

- 1965 *Works*. New York: Macmillan.

Mansueto, Anthony

- 1995 *Towards Synergism: The Cosmic Significance of the Human Civilizational Project*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- 2002a *Religion and Dialectics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- 2002b *Knowing God: Restoring Reason in an Age of Doubt*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

Maritain, Jacques

- 1951 *Man and the State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCool, Gerald

- 1977 *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Seabury.
- 1994 *The Neo-Thomists*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.

McGinn, Bernard

- 1979 *Apocalyptic Spirituality*. New York: Paulist.

Milbank, John

- 1990 *Theology and Social Theory*. London: Blackwell.
- 1999 "The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamman and Jacobi." In *Radical Orthodoxy*. Edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. London: Routledge.

O'Brien, David J. and Thomas A. Shannon, editors

- 1992 *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

Osheim, Duane J.

- 1977 *An Italian Lordship: The Bishopric of Lucca in the Late Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reeves, Marjorie

1969 *Prophecy in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1976 *The Prophetic Future in Joachim of Fiore*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reuther, Rosemary

1974 *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Seabury.

Segundo, Juan Luis

1976 *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

1985 *Theology and the Church*. New York: Harper.

Sereni, E.

1968 *Capitalismo nelle campagne*. Torino: Einaudi.

Solovyov, Vladimir

1995 *Lectures on Divine Humanity*. Revised and Edited by Boris Jakim. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne.

Thibault, Paul

1972 *Savoir et Pouvoir*. Laval: Presses Universitaires.

von Balthasar, Hans Urs

1968 *Love Alone*. London: Allen and Unwin

Zitara, Nicola

1971 *L'unita d'Italia, Nascita di una colonia*. Milano: Jaca Book.