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# The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy

**Paul E. Sigmund**

This article argues that there has been a movement in Catholic political thought from a position of doctrinal neutrality concerning forms of government — provided that they promote the common good — to an endorsement of democracy as the morally superior form of government. It traces the various theoretical and practical elements in the Catholic tradition that have favored or opposed liberal democracy, giving particular attention to the ambiguity of medieval theories, the centralizing and authoritarian tendencies in the early modern period, and the intense hostility of the nineteenth-century popes to French and Italian liberalism. After analyzing the emergence of neo-Thomistic theories of democracy in the twentieth century and their influence on Christian Democratic parties in Europe and Latin America, the article concludes that John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and the discussion of democracy by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) marked the abandonment of earlier opposition to liberal democracy and a decisive commitment to democracy and human rights.

“Catholicism is the oldest and greatest totalitarian movement in history.”  
Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myths and Democracy*

“You cannot find in the entire literature of Catholicism a single unequivocal endorsement by any Pope of democracy as a superior form of government.”

Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*

“It is in full accord with human nature that juridical-political structures should, with ever better success and without discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.”

Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*

It would seem to be an impossible task to relate a tradition that is nearly 2000 years old to a set of political theories and institutions that only emerged in the late eighteenth century. Yet this is done all the time, both by the spokesmen for that tradition and by politicians and statesmen who are influenced by it. In this article I will attempt to evaluate four basic responses to the question of the relation of the Catholic tradition and democracy. The first argues that the Catholic tradition is unconcerned with forms of government, provided only that they promote the general welfare (“the common good”) of the people. The second and more critical view maintains

that the primary concern of the leadership and spokesmen of the church is the protection of the institutional interests of the church and that any political order that respects those interests, however manifestly unjust, will receive the cooperation, and often the support of the church. A third critical response holds that a church that is hierarchical and quasi-monarchic in structure is likely to promote—and has done so historically—attitudes and practices on the part of its adherents that favor authoritarianism in government. Finally, there is a fourth position that argues that the basic values of Christianity that have been taught by the church are such as to lead over time to a recognition of the moral and religious superiority of democratic government. The following discussion will attempt to evaluate these positions, and if I can communicate my own view at the outset, it will argue that all four have some historical basis but that the official teaching of the Catholic church has moved from the first to the fourth positions—that is, from indifference among forms of government that promote the common good, to support for democracy as morally superior and philosophically preferable.

Modern liberal constitutional democracy as we know it involving the actual or potential exercise of universal suffrage in periodic contested elections, the rule of law, and guarantees of individual rights only emerged in the late eighteenth century. It was especially associated with the American and French revolutions, although the earlier English constitutional experience exercised an important influence upon it. Forms of direct democracy had developed in Athens of the fifth century B.C., in the medieval communes and Italian city-states, and in the Swiss cantons, but “modern” democracy with its representative institutions, constitutional guarantees, and independent judiciaries was a relatively late development. In its Anglo-American form that development took place under primarily Protestant auspices, and did not require a response on the part of the Catholic church other than the hope for religious toleration. (I am aware that there was a short-lived Catholic experiment in Maryland, but its general significance was limited.) It was only when the democratic wave affected countries that were basically Catholic that the institutional church was required to make a doctrinal response. The nature and circumstances of that response fundamentally affected the relationship between Catholicism and democracy for a century and a half, and provided empirical evidence for those who maintain the first three theses listed above. Yet throughout the

period of what was an essentially negative or at least neutral attitude toward modern democracy there were those who argued the fourth position and they were ultimately triumphant in the Second Vatican Council.

In doing so, they were able to point to certain elements in the Catholic tradition which were congruent with, indeed contributory to, the development of democratic values and institutions. These were important arguments in a church in which tradition was one of the bases for doctrine, and that tradition contained not one, but a number of different implications for political practice. I would like to summarize the components of that tradition as they developed in three different historical periods that antedated the emergence of modern democracy and provided elements for the Catholic response.

#### THE BIBLE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The historical debate on the political meaning of the New Testament has focused on a number of biblical passages. Christ's response to the question of the legitimacy of the payment of taxes to Rome, "Render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21), has been the source of a considerable literature on the relations of the spiritual and the temporal. It introduced an element of dualism into Christian political thinking which in its Catholic institutional expression led to the establishment of a separate institutional structure, the church, that was not, as nearly all earlier religious institutions had been, a part of the ethnic or political structure of existing communities. That separate structure soon felt the need for authoritative definition of dogma and membership, but the evidence seems to indicate the structure of church authority involved several different forms of church government. Peter and his successors were understood to have received a special commission from Christ, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), but the apostles and their successors, the bishops, were also given a universal mission by Christ ("Going therefore teach ye all nations" Matthew 28:19), and the early Christian communities were also seen as recipients of divine grace and inspiration ("Where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them" Matthew 18:20) and acted as communities to make decisions about common affairs, becoming almost independent self-governing entities in

periods of persecution.<sup>1</sup> Thus the government of the early church partook of elements of all three of the classic forms, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, and when later Christians looked back to it as a model they could find all three elements within it.

A similar ambiguity could be found in two New Testament texts concerned with political obligation. Paul's Letter to the Romans advises, "Let every soul be subject to higher powers. For there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God" (Romans 13:1-2), but when Peter was called before the Sanhedrin and forbidden to preach, he replied, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Political obligation was religiously based, but it was limited by a higher religious duty. The appropriate Christian response in cases of conflict between the two was to be a continuing subject of controversy.

#### MEDIEVAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

When the Christian message was expressed in philosophical terms by the Fathers of the Church the fusion of Christianity and classical culture included the adoption by many Christian writers of the neo-Platonic hierarchical models, especially as mediated through the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>2</sup> Hierarchy in theory was reinforced by hierarchy in practice as the Western Church was organized in a centralized hierarchical way under the papacy in the later Middle Ages, and feudal theory and practice conceived of medieval political and social life in terms of ranks and orders. Theorists such as John of Salisbury (1120-1180) employed classical organic analogies to describe the organization of society along lines that paralleled the structure of the human body, and medieval lawyers used such analogies to describe the organization and legal status of the emerging "corporate" groups, guilds, religious orders, etc.

On the other hand there were also more democratic elements in the medieval tradition. Law and government were seen as emerging from the people and justified by their consent (in the sense of *consensus*). Authority was limited by customary and natural law, as well as by a confused network of judicial bodies and authorities. In the church-state conflicts between the spiritual and temporal powers, each side appealed to the role of people to weaken the claims of the other side, and in the constitutional crises of the church associated with the Conciliar Movement conciliar writers used both

aristocratic ("episcopalist") and democratic (the tradition of election of bishops and of the pope) arguments to limit papalist claims.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of hierarchical (in Walter Ullmann's terms, "descending") and democratic ("ascending") elements in medieval political thought is illustrated in the political writings of Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, law is made by "the whole community or the person who represents it" (*S.T.* I-II. q. 90. art. 3) and the best form of government is one in which "all participate in the election of those who rule" (*S.T.* I-II. q. 105), but on the other, government by a monarch is best because it promotes unity and follows the pattern of divine monarchical government of the universe (*De Regimine Principum*, chap. 3). The pope leads the church to a higher spiritual goal of man, but (at least in one interpretation of Aquinas) can only intervene in temporal affairs "with respect to those things in which the temporal power is subject to him" (*S.T.* II-II. q. 60 art. 6). Law is morally obligatory and reflects the divine purposes in the world, but an unjust law that violates natural or divine law is no law at all, but an act of violence (*S.T.* I-II. q. 96. art. 2). All men are equal in the sight of God and even slaves have rights, but "there is an order to be found among men" according to which even before the Fall the more intelligent are to lead the less intelligent (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4. 81; and *S.T.* I. q. 92. art. 3-4).<sup>4</sup> Authoritarian, constitutionalist (St. Thomas as "the first Whig"), and democratic conclusions can be drawn from Aquinas's writings.

#### THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN STATE

The ambiguities of medieval thought were made less ambiguous by the reaction of the papacy in the early modern period to the Reformation and the rise of the absolute monarchs. While religious pluralism and the claims of conscience led Protestant writers such as Milton and Locke to argue for religious toleration, the popes preferred to centralize dogma and discipline and to deal with the absolute monarchs through concordats (*i.e.*, treaties), that guaranteed the rights of the church, including religious uniformity and financial support, and special rights in the areas of education and marriage. The "descending" thesis was applied unambiguously to the papacy, but its temporal counterpart, the "divine right of kings" as enunciated by James I, was rejected in favor of "ascending" theories put forward by Jesuit writers such as Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suarez on the derivation of political authority from God

through the people. There were debates as to whether the transfer of authority from the people to the ruler was an irrevocable one, and those who argued for a conditional transfer made important contributions to the constitutional tradition that was later developed by the Puritans and Locke. However, while there were moral and constitutional limits on his rule, the Catholic writers endorsed the rule of the monarch, who, while he did not rule by unlimited divine right, received his authority through an implicit or explicit grant from the people ultimately from God.

Thus by the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Catholic church in Western Europe was the state church in the principalities and kingdoms of southern and central Europe and Protestantism had a similar position in northern Europe. The union of throne and altar allied the interests of Catholicism closely to those of the absolute monarchs, and gave them considerable control over the churches in their territories, especially through the right of "patronage," naming bishops in cooperation with the Vatican either directly, or by selecting a candidate from a list, or at least vetoing unacceptable nominees.

This comfortable but corrupting arrangement was threatened in both theory and practice by the philosophies and political movements of the Enlightenment. "Ecrazez l'infame," exclaimed Voltaire, and Rousseau's *Social Contract* proposed a compulsory civil religion according to which loyalty to the General Will was to replace a Catholicism that divided the allegiances of its adherents. The French Revolution swept away the privileges of the church, and forced its priests to swear to a *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* (1792). In the early nineteenth century Napoleon and later the restored Bourbons reestablished the alliance of the church with the forces of order, authority, and dynastic legitimacy. In France two great spiritual political families, monarchists and republicans, entered into a struggle for power that dominated nineteenth-century French politics, and the church was clearly identified with the monarchy. Similarly in Italy and in Spain the liberal movement attacked the privileges of the church, and in Italy the Papal States that divided Italy diagonally from just north of Naples to just south of Venice provided a ready target for Italian nationalists. The church was placed in a defensive position against a rising tide of liberalism, nationalism, and revolution, and all three were linked to popular sovereignty.

A combination of territorial and institutional interests and a concern to defend the spiritual values represented by the church led

the nineteenth-century popes to issue the famous denunciations of liberal democracy which were later so frequently quoted by Paul Blanshard and others who viewed the rising influence of Catholicism in the twentieth century as a threat to American freedom. Among those popes were:

(a) *Gregory XVI (1831-1846)*. When efforts were made in France under the leadership of the Abbé Felicité de Lamennais through his journal, *L'Avenir*, to persuade the church to align itself with democracy and popular sovereignty, Gregory reacted with *Mirari Vos* (1832), a strongly worded encyclical that condemned the "absurd and erroneous proposition which claims that liberty of conscience must be maintained for everyone," along with "that harmful and never sufficiently denounced freedom to publish any writings whatsoever and disseminate them to the people." The pope called for "action to destroy the plague of bad books" and recommended "trust and submission to princes" denouncing those who "consumed with the unbridled lust for freedom, are entirely devoted to impairing and destroying all rights of dominion while bringing servitude to the people under the slogan of liberty" and attempting "to separate the Church from the state and to break the mutual concord between temporal authority and the priesthood."

Gregory's intemperate words were written in reaction to a revolution in the Papal States which he had suppressed with the help of Austrian troops, but it set the tone for papal statements for much of the rest of the century. Those who attempted to derive democratic conclusions from the Catholic tradition were to be fighting an uphill battle for the rest of the century, and indeed into the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

(b) *Pius IX (1846-1878)*. As is well known, Pius began his pontificate with considerable sympathy for the liberal movement, but the revolution that drove him out of Rome from 1848 until 1850 changed his attitude. In 1864 he published two important documents relating to liberalism and democracy. His encyclical, *Quanta Cura*, condemned those who assert that "that is the best condition of civil society in which no duty is recognized as attached to the civil power, of restraining, by enacting penalties, offenders against the Catholic religion." He quoted Gregory XVI who had described liberty of conscience as "an insanity" and freedom of speech as "injurious babbling." The encyclical was accompanied by *The Syllabus of Errors*, a compilation of past papal statements on related topics. Included among the errors listed were the belief "that every man is free to embrace the



religion he shall believe true by the light of reason; . . . that the eternal salvation may at least be hoped for, of all those who are not at all in the Church of Christ; . . . that it is no longer necessary that the Catholic religion be held as the only religion of the state," and (the most famous error) "that the Roman pontiff can and ought to, reconcile himself to, and agree with, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."

(c) *Leo XIII (1878-1903)*. In the next pontificate the papacy initiated attempts to find a more positive response to democracy. Leo encouraged an effort by French Catholics to come to terms with the French Third Republic in the so-called *ralliement* policy. In Italy, however, he did not lift the ban on Catholic participation in Italian politics that had been imposed by his predecessor in 1867 following the seizure of the Papal States. The famous labor encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), called attention to the plight of the working classes and encouraged the formation of (Catholic) trade unions. Despite the pressures of Catholic monarchists, Leo argued in his encyclical, *On the Christian Constitution of States (Immortale Dei)*, issued in 1885, that "no one of the several forms of government is itself condemned. . . . Neither is it blameworthy in itself in any manner, for the people to have a share, greater or less, in the government; for at certain times and under certain laws, such participation may not only be of benefit to the citizens, but may even be of obligation."<sup>6</sup> However, in both this encyclical and in *Human Liberty (Libertas Humana)* issued in 1888, he reaffirmed Gregory's denunciations of freedom of worship, of expression, and of teaching, accusing the liberals of making "the state absolute and omnipotent" and of proclaiming "that man should live altogether independently of God." Indeed the whole liberal project was described as "the sullied product of a revolutionary age of man's unbounded urge for innovation." Following this denunciation, however, Leo qualified it by stating that the church "does not forbid public authority to tolerate what is at variance with truth and justice, for the sake of avoiding some greater evil or preserving some greater good." (This passage gave rise to the distinction by Catholic theologians between the "thesis" of Catholicism as the established church, and the "hypothesis" of religious toleration in a situation of religious pluralism.)

Leo was thus demonstrating greater flexibility toward liberal democracy but he was still suspicious of what he saw as its anticlerical tendencies currently being illustrated in France in the effort of the Third Republic to separate church and state in the areas of educa-

tion and of public support of the Catholic religion. He also viewed as dangerous the development of cooperation with other religions such as the Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World's Fair in 1892 in which Cardinal Gibbons shared the platform with Protestant dignitaries. Late in the nineties the Vatican discovered a new heresy, "Americanism," which was the subject of a letter from the pope to Cardinal Gibbons which drew attention to the errors "called by some, Americanism" which maintained that the church should adapt itself to the modern age and promote the active virtues rather than those of contemplation and penitence. The Apostolic Delegate to the United States when he returned to Rome in 1895 saw to it that the rector of Catholic University was removed, and that the "naturalism" of the American church and its tendency to minimize its differences from Protestants were officially condemned.

(d) *Pius X (1903-1914)*. Leo's effort to encourage a reconciliation between French Catholics and the Third Republic had fallen afoul of the polarization of France into two camps as a result of the Dreyfus affair at the end of the century, but not before it had produced an effort by a French Catholic leader, Marc Sangnier, to establish *Le Sillon*, a movement to encourage Catholic participation in French political life. His organization fell victim to the increased conservatism of the Vatican that followed the election of Pius X in 1903 and the formal separation of church and state in France in 1905. In 1907 Pius issued a decree and an encyclical against the heresy of "Modernism" which was accused of "proposing a reform of church government to bring it into harmony with men's conscience which is turning towards democracy." Three years later *Le Sillon* was condemned by the pope because "in order to justify their social dreams they appeal to the Gospel, interpolated in their own manner, and what is still more grave to a disfigured and diminished Christ,"<sup>7</sup> and this incipient movement towards Christian democracy was destroyed. Another small party of Christian Democratic inspiration, the Popular Democratic Party, was established in the 1930's but it was not until after World War II that a large Catholic-based party committed to democracy emerged in France. Similarly in Italy the boycott by Catholics of the republic was only finally lifted in 1919, and the Popular Party founded by Don Luigi Sturzo after spectacular initial electoral success was in effect dissolved by the Vatican after the triumph of Mussolini, and Sturzo went into exile.

(e) *Pius XI (1922-1939)*. Despite these actions, which were more related to French and Italian politics than to the general political

thought of the church, one began to see the beginnings of an attempt by Catholic leaders in a number of European countries to reexamine the question of the relation of Catholicism and democracy. It is true that the papacy under Pius XI seemed willing to enter into agreements with the fascist dictators. Pius XI signed the Lateran Treaty with Mussolini in 1929. In 1933 the votes of the Catholic Center party gave Hitler absolute power through the Enabling Act which was followed by the signing of a Concordat between the Vatican and the Hitler government. There seemed to be some not-accidental resemblances between the quasi-corporatist structures of cooperation between labor and business recommended in Pius XI's encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), and the corporatism adopted by authoritarian regimes in Portugal, Austria, and Italy in the twenties and thirties. However by the mid-1930's the totalitarian character of the Italian and German regimes had become evident, and in 1937 Pius XI issued two denunciatory encyclicals, *Mit Brennender Sorge* and *Abbiamo Bisogno*. However, the important developments were not so much in the area of international politics but in that of Catholic philosophy.

One of Leo XIII's many accomplishments was to promote the revival of the study of St. Thomas Aquinas in Catholic seminaries and institutions of higher learning through his encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* (1879). The study of Thomism led American theologians such as John A. Ryan in America and Jacques Maritain in France to return to the sources in St. Thomas, Suarez, and Bellarmine to find the doctrine of the popular origin of political authority and to apply it to argue that government must be based on the explicit or implicit consent of the people. They accepted the traditional Catholic doctrine that the origin of all authority is from God, but argued that the Catholic tradition also provided for its mediation through the people. Although Maritain was converted to Catholicism in 1906 and to Thomism in 1912, he only began to write about politics in the late 1920's following the 1926 condemnation by Pius XI of the right-wing French movement, Action Francaise, with which Maritain had been sympathetic. From that time until the 1950's Maritain wrote many books about the application of Thomist principles to democracy. The best known of those books, *Integral Humanism* (originally published in French in 1936), *Scholasticism and Politics* (New York, 1940), *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* (New York, 1943), and *Man and the State* (lectures delivered in English at the University of Chicago in 1950 and published in the following year) argued that

“integral” or “personalist” and “communitarian” democracy was the best application of Christian and Thomist political principles and that the modern democratic state was the result of the “leavening” influence of the Gospels in human history.<sup>8</sup> Maritain distinguished his religiously based personalism from what he considered to be the egoistic individualism of “bourgeois liberalism” and the collectivism of Marxism, but he argued, on religious and philosophical grounds, for a religiously pluralist and socially concerned democratic state. In *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law*, he developed a list of basic human rights that anticipated the listing in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Rights, basing it on a reinterpretation of Aquinas’s discussions of natural law in the *Summa Theologiae* (I-II. q. 94). Along with others such as Yves Simon (*Philosophy of Democratic Government* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951]) and Heinrich Rommen (*The State in Catholic Thought* [St. Louis: Herder, 1945]) as well as non-Catholic neo-Thomists such as Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago (Mortimer J. Adler and Walter Farrell, O.P., “The Theory of Democracy,” *The Thomist* [July 1941-Jan. 1944]), Maritain was responsible for a new development in Catholic political thought that had been anticipated but never articulated in terms of the Catholic tradition by earlier French and Italian writers — the argument that democracy was not simply one of several forms of government, all of which were acceptable provided that they promoted “the common good,” but was the one form that was most in keeping with the nature of man, and with Christian values.<sup>9</sup> The traditional concern with justice had been expanded to give a religious justification for freedom, and the Christian belief in equality before God was now interpreted to include political and juridical equality as well.

#### CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY

Maritain’s writings on democracy were directly adopted, read, and commented upon by leaders of the Christian Democratic movement in Europe and Latin America. Indeed, in the latter case my own research on the origins of the Christian Democratic party in Chile has revealed a direct connection between a visit to Argentina by Maritain in the late 1930’s and the foundations of the predecessor party to the Christian Democrats as a result of the breakaway of the youth section of the church-influenced Conservative party. The publication in Chile of Maritain’s *Letter on Independence* at the time

of his visit to Argentina led to his discovery by the founders of the new party. Two of its leaders, Jaime Castillo, (currently Chairman of the Chilean Human Rights Commission) and the late Eduardo Frei, the future president of Chile (1964–1970), wrote books and pamphlets about his work. In other countries research institutes on Catholic social and political thought used his works, and they became a major source of democratic theory in Latin America.

The same thing occurred in Europe after World War II with the emergence of large Christian Democratic parties in France (the MRP), Germany (CDU-CSU), and Italy (DCI), that became bulwarks of postwar European democracy. For all of these parties, as their names indicate, Christianity implies democracy, and Maritain's personalism and communitarianism provided a theoretical justification that drew on Catholic and Thomist conceptions of human nature to argue for free institutions, the welfare state, and political democracy.

The conservative and integralist resistance to democracy that had had such a powerful influence over the Vatican in earlier decades was now largely discredited, and beginning with the Christmas messages of Pope Pius XII during World War II, the official statements of the papacy began to draw direct links between freedom, democracy, and the Christian message. The clearest example of this new attitude is Pius XII's Christmas message of 1944. Yet even when he praises democracy, the pope warns of possible abuses. In his message, he distinguishes between "the people" and "the mass," describing the latter as "the main enemy of true democracy and of its ideal of liberty and equality." "A democratic state left to the arbitrary will of the mass . . . becomes a pure and simple system of absolutism. State absolutism consists as a matter of fact, in the wrong principle that the authority of the state is unlimited . . . and there is not left any appeal whatever to a superior and morally binding law."<sup>10</sup> Pius seems to have been thinking of the Communist invocation of the name of the people to justify its oppression, but there is also an effort to maintain continuity with the criticisms of liberal democracy made by his predecessors.

In Latin America Catholic conservatives still resisted the message of Maritain. An Argentine theologian, Julio Meinvielle published a number of attacks on Maritain, the best known of which is *De Lamennais à Maritain* (Buenos Aires: Nuestro Tiempo, 1945; French translation, Paris: La Cité Catholique, 1953; revised edition, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Teoria, 1967) which quoted from the

nineteenth-century papal condemnations to argue for the heterodoxy of Maritain. Yet it was a losing battle for the Latin American conservatives and the Latin American church in the postwar period began to undergo a rapid political transformation from the role of a principal supporter of the traditional order to that of a defender of democracy and human rights. Particularly significant was the conduct of the hierarchy in most Latin American countries (Argentina would be the exception) in explicitly defending human rights and democracy against the military rulers who seized power in most of the countries in the area in the 1960's and 1970's.

It was ironic therefore that just as Catholic Europe and Latin America were finally opting for democracy, bitter debate broke out in the United States over the relation of Catholicism and democracy. That debate was prompted by the appearance of Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power* in 1948 but it extended into areas of public policy, especially the question of public aid for parochial schools. For a time in the late 1940's the editorial and letter columns of the *Washington Post* were full of references to nineteenth-century papal statements, and American liberals worried publicly about the possible threat to the American tradition posed by increasing Catholic political influence.

Blanshard quoted from a standard, if at that time somewhat dated, source, *The State and the Church*, by John A. Ryan and Moorhouse F. X. Millar (New York: Macmillan, 1920) a sentence that terrified his liberal Protestant and Jewish readers: "If there is only one true religion and if its possession is the most important good in life for the State as for individuals, then the public profession, protection, and promotion of this religion and the legal prohibition of all direct assaults upon it, becomes one of the obvious and fundamental duties of the state" (p. 35). Less threatening but still disturbing was the discussion in the more recent version of that work, retitled *Catholic Principles of Politics*, written by Msgr. Ryan and Francis J. Boland (New York: Macmillan, 1940). Ryan had long argued for the Catholic and scholastic roots of democracy (*Catholic Doctrine on the Right of Self-Government* [New York: Macmillan, 1919]) citing Aquinas, Suarez, and Bellarmine among others on the people's role as the mediator of political authority which although it originates with God is transmitted by the consent of the people, and can be limited by that same people. Yet Ryan had to admit that earlier Catholic writers had not in fact concluded that representative democracy was the logical application of the popular origin of political authority and

that more recent Catholic writers had cast doubt on the popular role. However, he argued that “many Catholic writers of the nineteenth century” had departed from the doctrine of Bellarmine and Suarez because of “the superficial resemblance between this doctrine and the theories of popular sovereignty associated with the French Revolution and subsequent revolutionary movements,” and thus had “turned their backs on the traditional teaching” (p. 80). Yet even mainstream Catholic writers, Ryan and Boland wrote, held that once the people had transferred their authority to the monarch, it was almost impossible for them to recover it, even when there was “profound determination” on the part of the people to establish a republican form of government.

As late as the 1940's, the official Vatican position on politics was still that enunciated in *Immortale Dei* in 1885, and Ryan and Boland felt compelled to print extracts from that encyclical and to follow it with a somewhat lame defense of Leo XIII's teaching there that the state should formally recognize the true religion and limit freedom of expression by other religious groups. They argued that while “error has not the same rights as truth,” “the foregoing propositions have application only in the completely Catholic state” (pp. 318–19). In a situation of mixed religions, “even Spain and the South American republics,” interference with “established religious groups” would “do more harm than good,” and in many cases would violate the governing constitution to which the people had consented. Yet in the 1940's there were still restrictions on the rights of Protestants to proselytize in Catholic countries such as Spain and Colombia and American critics worried that something similar might be imposed if Catholics gained power. American Catholic spokesmen insisted that there was no danger that a Catholic majority would repeal the First Amendment, but Blanshard could respond by recalling the thesis-hypothesis distinction of the time of Leo XIII to prove that the hypothesis of religious toleration would be converted into the thesis of state support for Catholicism if American Catholics were ever able to exercise sufficient political power. To militant liberals for whom “anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals,” the whole debate was not reassuring.

What was more reassuring and Blanshard in the 1958 edition of his book felt it necessary to warn Americans not to be deceived by its “jesuitical” character (p. 346) was a series of articles in *The Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society* (1948) and in *Theological Studies* (June–September 1949) that argued on the basis of medi-

eval sources, especially the thirteenth-century theologian, John of Paris, that the authentic Catholic tradition does not necessarily imply that the Catholic ideal is the establishment of a state church, and that indeed the United States was closer to that ideal than was Franco Spain. The Vatican, in the person of Cardinal Ottaviani, head of the Holy Office, was not sympathetic to Murray's argument (see his statement in *New York Times*, 23 July 1953) and his arguments were extensively debated in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* over the next several years. Murray's writings, however, were widely influential both in the United States and in Europe, and as a *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council Murray exerted significant influence over the preparation of *The Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965).

A combination of developments in theory and in practice in Europe, Latin America, and the United States thus combined to produce the setting for a significant modification of the Vatican position on democracy, as well as to render moot the earlier liberal suspicions in the United States. In the United States the whole issue was aired at length during the presidential campaign of John Kennedy in 1960. His own statements as well as his conduct of the presidency seem to have laid to rest permanently the fear that Catholics in American politics are likely to threaten American freedoms. The saliency of Catholic opposition to abortion, the one major religio-political issue that could have been a source of difficulties with regard to the imposition of Catholic moral standards upon the rest of the country, has been softened by the significant involvement of conservative Protestants and Jews in the anti-abortion movement, as well as by public dissent on the part of some Catholic politicians (*e.g.*, Geraldine Ferraro and Mario Cuomo) from the hierarchy's position favoring a legislative or constitutional prohibition.

The change in the Vatican position on religious freedom dates not from 1965, the date of the Vatican II decree, but from 1963 with the publication of Pope John XXIII's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*.<sup>11</sup> The encyclical begins in what appears to be a classically conservative fashion with a discussion of "order between men." After stating that every human being is a person by virtue of which "he has rights and duties of his own, flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature," the encyclical then moves immediately into a discussion of human rights (followed later by discussion of duties, a reversal of the usual order in earlier Catholic statements on the subject).

The third right that is discussed is "the right to worship God ac-



ording to one's conscience" and this is described as follows: "Every human being has the right to honor God according to the dictates of an upright conscience, and therefore to worship God privately and publicly." The reference to the right to public worship was the first indication of a change in the official position which in places like Spain had tolerated non-Catholic worship only in private, a policy which as recently as 1953 had been defended by Cardinal Ottaviani. Two pages later, the encyclical seems to endorse liberal democracy stating that "the dignity of the human person involves the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute one's part to the common good of the citizens" and adding, "The human person is also entitled to the juridical protection of his rights." In the next section, the encyclical states that "it is impossible to determine, once and for all, the most suitable form of government," but it reasserts the advantages of participation and alludes to the need for ministers of government to hold office only for a limited time, thus apparently arguing for a system of periodic elections. It was left, however, to the Second Vatican Council to commit the church fully to democracy, when it stated in *Gaudium et Spes* that "it is in full accord with human nature" that all should "participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders." The paragraph had footnotes to the 1942 and 1944 Christmas messages of Pope Pius XII and to *Pacem in Terris*, but it clearly marked a much more complete commitment to democracy than heretofore.

The council also moved toward a partial decentralization of the internal structure of the church in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* which defined the church as "the people of God" (chap. II), and stated that "the order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in teaching authority. . . . Together with its head, the Roman Pontiff and never without this head the episcopal order is the subject of supreme and full power over the universal church" (chap. III). There is a footnote reference to a report to the First Vatican Council which was never acted upon because of the breakup of the meeting due to foreign occupation of Rome, but it is very doubtful that the statement quoted above would ever have been adopted in 1870-71. The document also included a lengthy discussion of the role of the laity emphasizing their duty to sanctify the world and stating that "The laity are gathered

together in the People of God and make up the body of Christ under one Head" (chap. IV).

The subsequent effects of these important changes are well known. Synods of bishops meet regularly in ordinary or extraordinary (as on the twentieth anniversary of the Council in late 1985) session. The laity has been more deeply involved, and new theologies have been developed which emphasize the importance of the involvement of the laity, especially the poor. The church itself has not become a democracy, and those who have argued too strongly for an increase in internal democratization have sometimes had difficulties with the Vatican.<sup>12</sup> It has, however, moved away from the nineteenth-century monarchical model to a mixture of forms of authority that, I would argue, is closer to its original structure.

#### CONCLUSION

What are we to conclude, then, from our discussion of the relation of the Catholic tradition and modern democracy? The pattern that emerges from the above review is a complex one, but it is not impossible to summarize. Elements of community participation in church affairs have been present in Catholicism from the beginning, but they have always combined with more hierarchical elements, both in order to safeguard the deposit of the faith and to continue the Apostolic Succession to the apostles and St. Peter. The early church tolerated the empire, only to be embraced (some say co-opted) by it. The medieval church however managed to maintain independence from, and even at times preeminence over, the temporal power, but in both church and state the tradition of a mixture of forms of government prevailed. With the Reformation, the more democratic and aristocratic forms of church constitution were embodied in the various forms of Protestantism, while Catholic controversialists argued for papal monarchy but continued to insist on the popular origins of political authority against the claims of the absolute monarchs of the day. In the early modern period the populist elements in the Catholic tradition were deemphasized, as church teaching tended to support monarchy in church and state. When the French Revolution took an anticlerical turn, and nineteenth-century democratic and liberal movements pressed for the separation of church and state, attempted to wrest control over education from the church, and annexed the Papal States as part of the struggle for Italian unification, the papacy responded with a series of con-

demnations of an exaggerated and stereotyped liberalism both because it threatened its institutional privileges and because it appeared to be inspired by an anti-Christian naturalism and rationalism. Efforts in France and Italy to relate liberal democracy to Catholicism met with repeated papal condemnations, or, later in the century, reluctant toleration. It was only in the middle third of the twentieth century that the ancient religious roots of popular participation were rediscovered in Europe and Latin America and in the postwar period what had been an embattled Christian Democratic philosophy became the dominant Catholic political theory in Europe and Latin America. At last these developments which had always been supported by Catholics in England and the United States were given formal expression and approval in the Second Vatican Council, which also acted to reverse the tendency to ecclesiastical centralization and authoritarianism which had been dominant since the Counter Reformation.

We return then to the four positions outlined at the beginning of this paper. As this outline has indicated indifference as to the various forms of government that promote the common good has finally yielded to the recognition of the moral superiority of democratic government and guarantees of human rights. The hierarchic and centralized structure of the church has been modified, and with it the associated fear of democracy that seems to have motivated the nineteenth-century popes. Those who argue that the movement to democracy and human rights by Catholicism is only a maneuver to maintain its institutional interests may not be convinced, but I hope that this review will indicate that the shift that I have described is something more than tactical, that it is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, and that (as the heroic actions of many Catholics in Latin America during the last two decades in defense of human rights have demonstrated) it has profound implications for the future of democracy and freedom in the world today.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the political structure of the early church, see the documents assembled in James T. Shotwell, ed., *The See of Peter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940).

<sup>2</sup> Especially *The Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Dionysius was a fifth century neo-Platonist Syrian monk, who was believed to be the "Dionysius the Areopagite" converted in Athens by St. Paul after his speech on the Unknown God (Acts 17:34). See my discussion in *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See the documents in Brian Tierney, ed., *Church and State (1150-1300)* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964). On the Conciliar Movement see Brian Tierney, *Foundations of Conciliar Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955). Francis Oakley, *The Political Thought of Pierre d'Ailly* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); and Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa*, chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Walter Ullmann, *A History of Medieval Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975); and Paul E. Sigmund, ed. and trans., *St. Thomas Aquinas, On Ethics and Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> The encyclicals of Gregory XVI and Pius IX are quoted from the English translations collected in Claudia Carlen, ed., *The Papal Encyclicals, (1740-1878)* (Raleigh: McGrath Publishers, 1981). For background reading, the best sources are the writings of E. E. Y. Hales, especially *Pio Nono* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1954); *The Catholic Church and the Modern World* (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1958); and H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965). Excerpts from *The Syllabus of Errors (1864)* of Pius IX appear in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

<sup>6</sup> Leo XIII's encyclicals are translated in Joseph Husslein, S.J., ed., *Social Well-springs*, vol. 1 (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishers, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in A. Vidler, *A Century of Social Catholicism* (London: SPCK, 1964), p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> By 1958 his American experience had led him to extol the most bourgeois liberal of all modern states as the best application of Christian principles, see *Reflections on America* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> On the development of Maritain's political theory see my article "Maritain on Politics" in Deal Hudson and Matthew Mancini, eds., *Understanding Maritain* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1987). The best introduction to his political thought is *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). See also the selections in Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward, eds., *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain* (New York: Scribner's, 1955; paperback ed., Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1965). Like Maritain Rommen believes that democracy is the product of "Christian ideas matured to their full meaning" (*State in Catholic Thought*, p. 485), but he is more willing to take account of the papacy's hostile attitude toward democracy which he attributes to its concern to defend the Papal States and opposition to internal democratization in the church (p. 489). Thinking apparently of Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Acton, Rommen also notes that "a great many nineteenth-century (Catholic) writers of influence (understand) that freedom and democracy must be valued positively, and can be valued so especially well from the principles ever present in Catholic thought" (p. 492).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Oscar Halecki, *Pius XII* (London: Weidenfeld, 1954), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1963). All quotations are taken from this translation.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the 1984 summons to Rome of Frei Leonardo Boff because of statements made in his book, *Church, Charism, and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) regarding the "expropriation of the spiritual means of production by the hierarchy." It is noteworthy that he was accompanied to Rome by two Brazilian cardinals and (fellow-Franciscans). For a discussion of this and related post-conciliar developments, see my forthcoming study, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?*