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CATHOLICISM AND DEMOCRACY: PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract

This essay examines the record of the Church's teaching on political democracy from the 19th to 21st centuries. There will be a focus on the Vatican, the papacy, and Italian politics for constructing the narrative since the Church's direct investment in temporal politics and institutional self-interest is clear in the story of Italian democracy. There will also be an overview of the modern papacy's evolution in its assessment of political democracy to the point where opposition has become active support and commendation.

Keywords: Catholicism; Christian Democracy; Democracy; Forms of Government; Papacy; Political Liberties; Religious Freedom

This essay presents a select overview of the Catholic Church and democracy in the modern era. A particular focus will be to look at the story of democracy in Italy because nowhere else did the papacy play such a direct role in politics and nowhere else was the element of institutional self-interest so clearly on display in the Church's political agenda. The essay will examine democracy and Catholicism in the writings of popes in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, before concluding with a brief reflection on the historical narrative. The history of Catholicism and democracy is not a

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consistent story of unyielding opposition, nor, however, is it a simple story of approval, as might be mistakenly concluded by the a-historical treatment of the topic in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.[1]

Resistance to Democracy

Following the defeat of Napoleon, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 restored the Papal States to the Catholic Church after Bonaparte had annexed them. When Gregory XVI was elected to the papacy in February of 1831, he soon faced tensions in his lands stemming from the overthrow of the Bourbons in France, a dynasty also reinstated by the Congress of Vienna. When the new French government seized the region of Ancona, it reignited fervour against clerical rule in the northern Papal States. Gregory quickly made clear where he stood on the questions of liberal freedoms, popular sovereignty, democracy, and the temporal power of the papacy. He appealed to the conservative Austrian Foreign Minister Metternich to provide Austrian troops for help in quelling the reformist movement in the Papal States.

During the Congress of Vienna the leaders of Europe seemed to be confronted with an either/or choice: restore the *ancien régime* or establish a new order founded upon the values of the 1789 Revolution. "The Church was a natural ally of Metternich because of its totally negative experience of the Revolution."[2] Yet, there were voices urging the Church to choose the other path in a post-Napoleonic Europe. It was the ongoing voices of these Catholic liberals that disturbed Gregory, who saw them as internal opposition to his papal politics. Because the source of the problems he inherited was the impetus toward liberal democracy that had grown out of the French Revolution, the pope decided to take direct aim at the supporters of liberal republicanism within the Catholic ranks. In the summer of 1832, Gregory issued the encyclical *Mirari Vos*, a document "On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism," in which he condemned a whole series of liberal ideals and values.

Gregory was a deeply conservative man who governed the Papal States rather repressively in response to revolutionary terrorist attacks in the north by republican-nationalists. When he died in 1846, he was "the most unpopular of popes" and "left a sense of breach

[1]Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2004.

[2] Thomas Bokenkotter, *Church and Revolution*, New York: Image/Doubleday Books, 1998, 39.

between government and governed, with an idea that the sovereign was a remote monarch who did not wish his people to progress."[3] By the time of his passing, Gregory had cast the Catholic Church into a position of strong resistance to the advance of liberalism in general, and democracy in particular.

Gregory was succeeded by Pius IX, who came on the scene amidst a strong desire among many in the Papal States for a different kind of pope. Pius IX's closest advisor was Monsignor Corboli Bussi who encouraged the pope to take a position of openness toward change. Bussi understood that the papacy and democracy did not cohere, but he helped Pius to see that many with liberal ideas ought not be dismissed as being of bad will or intent. In early actions, like an amnesty for more than 400 political prisoners arrested during Gregory's papacy, along with 200 more permitted to return from exile, Pius endeared himself to the people of Rome and the rest of the Papal States. The action gained him a continental-wide reputation for being somewhat of a liberal and expectations grew that Pius would create a constitutional monarchy in the Papal States, permit Catholics to hold liberal views publicly, establish relations with Protestant states, and even lead a movement to create a federated Italian nation with himself as president.[4]

All of these expectations went well beyond what Pius IX was willing to do, but the pent-up zeal for reform quickly overtook the practical moderation that Bussi encouraged in Pius. The pope did allow a bicameral legislature and permitted elections by indirect suffrage. However, events outside Italy proved too powerful to ignore. In the winter of 1848 the reign of Louis Philippe of France ended and a Second Republic was declared. This new revolution set off a series of liberal revolts in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Sicily, and Italy, as well as disturbances in Scandinavian and other countries. In Italy, Pius IX was caught between shifting alliances and events as the Austrians, the republicans, the Sardinians, the Sicilians, and other regional leaders clashed. At one point, Pius had to flee Rome when Garibaldi and Mazzini declared the Roman Republic. Eventually, Pius was able to return to Rome and was restored to the papal throne, but only after the French under Louis-Napoléon, who was then President of France, and the Hapsburgs in Austria joined forces to defeat the Italian republicans.

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[3]Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes 1830-1914*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 60.

[4]Chadwick, *History of the Popes 1830-1914*, 64.

The story in Italy was similar to outcomes elsewhere; none of the liberal revolutions succeeded for long and the forces of counterrevolution reasserted monarchical power and hierarchical social order. The pope who returned to Rome in the summer of 1849 was a different pope than before. He had seen the outcome of liberal ideas was revolution and chaos; he had been saved from exile and returned to power by forces of the *ancien régime*; and the 1850s were becoming a time of religious revival with people from all over Europe rallying to his side. In addition, many of the restored monarchies were Catholic and favourably disposed to the Church. It was a time when the Catholic Church was deeply identified in popular opinion with opposition to liberal freedoms and democratic equality.

Hence, the hopes of Italian nationalist-liberals no longer were pinned on the papal presidency of a federated national government. Instead the future seemed to rely upon the Piedmont, the only state in Italy with a constitutional government. In the ensuing years the energy for uniting more and more regions of Italy and for establishing liberal freedoms of religion, conscience, the press, and democratic governance were to make the situation of the Papal States more precarious. Victor Emmanuel II, the King of Piedmont and Sardinia, with the aid of his skilled advisor Count Cavour, persuaded Louis Napoléon to become an ally in an effort to push the Austrians out of northeastern Italy. Many of the northern states rebelled against the pope's authority and joined with the French and Piedmontese in war against Austria in 1859. A peace was arranged the next year that left Venice under the Austrians, but gave much of northern Italy to Victor Emmanuel, and France gained Nice and Savoy. Now a powerful northern kingdom was on the pope's border and occupying his most prosperous lands. The papal protector, the French emperor, was on the side of the Italians, even if he wanted Pius IX to retain some area of rule. Despite overtures for a settlement, the pope would accept no compromise and excommunicated all who usurped his lands in the north.[5]

The position of the pope was vulnerable politically, the northern kingdom pressed for his remaining lands north of Rome and the revolutionary Garibaldi was threatening from the south. It was in this atmosphere that the idea of a greatly reduced papal state was introduced, Rome and its immediate environs. In time, even that suggestion was overwhelmed by the recognition that a united Italy

[5]Chadwick, *History of the Popes 1830-1914*, 132-160.

would have to have Rome as its capital. Pius IX may have had legitimate complaints about the annexations of his lands by others and the hardball politics of Italian unification. But the changing facts on the ground were far more powerful than the papal words.

If one shifts attention away from the perils of papal temporal politics to the internal life of the church, the importance of papal words remained obvious. However much Pius IX was losing temporal authority, his religious authority in governance of the church was growing. His 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the attached "Syllabus of Errors," followed the path laid down by Gregory XVI and *Mirari Vos*. Pius, in his encyclical and the "Syllabus," condemned liberalism and its associated freedoms. It was a frontal assault on the beliefs of French Catholics who had endorsed the Second Republic before Louis Napoléon's coup. Pius flatly dismissed constitutional principles of nations like the United States that embraced freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. The words of Pius made liberal ideas a dangerous thing for a Catholic to be accused of holding.

In 1870, France declared war on Prussia. A short time later, the French troops that had been stationed in Rome to protect the pope and the city were withdrawn. In their absence the pressures on Pius to give up his claims of temporal power over the city returned in even greater degree. Civil unrest broke out in the remaining papal lands outside of Rome. Victor Emmanuel II moved his troops into these areas to stop the rioting and lawlessness and restore social order. The King sent an emissary to assure the pope that he would be safe, but that his troops would be entering the city. Pius was unmoved and consulted with a few chosen advisors whether he should flee or stay. In the end, due to his unhappy experience with flight in 1848, plus his present age, and his belief that world opinion would favour his steadfast example, Pius remained in the Vatican. The following weeks saw the seizure of many church holdings and institutions, even as the pope was personally protected by Italian troops. It was during this time that Pius chose to remain within the confines of the little property remaining under his control: St Peter's, the Vatican, Castel Sant'Angelo, and the Trastevere (Rome west of the Tiber). This began the period when the pope was portrayed as the "Prisoner of the Vatican."[6] In 1874 he approved the decree of *Non Expedit*, that prohibited Catholic participation in the new Italian state. The symbolism of the pope living behind the walls of the Vatican, the

[6]Chadwick, *History of the Popes 1830-1914*, 226.

papal withdrawal from the temporal affairs of Italy and non-participation in public life, further cemented the view that the Church looked upon modern politics, and even much of modern culture, as unfit for Catholic support. The pope and the Church would stand apart from a world that was moving more in sync with liberal ideals.

When Pius IX died in 1878 he had the longest reign of any pope in history. Though widely admired by Catholics outside of Italy, he had both supporters and fierce detractors within Italy. The man who succeeded him, Leo XIII was a conservative aristocrat who had supported the teaching of the "Syllabus." Like other popes of the 19th century, Leo associated liberal democracy with several distinct but related tenets: separation of church and state, the cessation of public support for Catholic institutions, state oversight of both education and marriage, and the fear that liberal democracy would promote rationalism and tolerate anti-clericalism.

Ambivalence toward Democracy

Leo XIII regretted the image of the Church as being out of touch with the various developments in the wider world and wanted to reassert a leadership role for the Church. He wanted to instruct the world and teach it the truths of Christian morality. Leo's vehicle was that of the encyclical; he wrote more of them than any other pope before or since. In the first year of his papacy Leo issued *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, which criticized the errors of rival social philosophies and upheld the Catholic viewpoint. Leo pointed out that just as God had created the cosmos in an ordered hierarchy, citing the distinctions among the heavenly choirs of angels as illustrative of the divine plan, "so also has He appointed that there should be various orders in civil society, differing in dignity, rights, and power, whereby the State, like the Church, should be one body, consisting of many members, some nobler than others, but all necessary to each other and solicitous for the common good."[7] Important to note here is Leo's view that the distinctions between people extended to dignity and rights. If democracy assumes an equality of standing among its citizens, then Leo was no democrat.

Leo's views on democracy did undergo evolution, however. While initially sympathetic to his predecessor's views expressed in the "Syllabus of Errors," he was not blind to the events taking place in various parts of the world. Prior to *Rerum Novarum*, Leo had issued a

[7]Leo XIII, *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, 1878, n. 6, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_28121878_quod-apostolici-muneris.html

series of encyclicals beginning with *Immortale Dei* in 1885 on the Christian nature of states, *Libertas* in 1888, which examined the true nature of liberty and individual freedoms, and *Sapientiae Christianae* on the civic duties of Catholics in 1890. *Libertas*, in particular, took a somewhat pastoral approach to the situation of the Church in Europe. Leo affirmed that the Church could work with a variety of constitutional states, including democratic ones. Thus, it was possible for French Catholics to be democrats and republicans. In saying so, Leo entered into the highly divisive politics of France, where there was still an ultramontane wing that believed Catholic France should be committed to a monarchy. On the other side, liberals wished to create a Catholic party that would participate in the politics of the Third Republic.

Leo was a monarchist at heart, but if France was settled on a republican constitution, he did not want to see the Catholic Church lose its standing by papal intransigence in supporting a monarchy. He addressed an encyclical to the French bishops urging them to be more adaptable in their relations with the Republic. This became known as Leo's policy of *ralliement*, that is, of rallying or urging French Catholics to support the Republic and participate in it with the aim of reforming its anticlericalism and the excesses of individual liberties. Despite the loyalty of many French Catholics to the papacy, there was great disgruntlement from those who had defended the teaching and policies of Pius IX. Most of the bishops and Catholic aristocracy resisted Leo on the matter and the *ralliement* failed. Nonetheless, it was not a total loss, for Catholics in other countries who were eager to participate in the various experiments in democracy taking shape, took Leo's letter as a sign that Catholics need not be adverse to all forms of democratic politics.

Catholics in an array of settings drew upon the "thesis-hypothesis" formulation of Bishop Félix Dupanloup of Orléans, France at the time of Pius IX's "Syllabus of Errors." That formulation distinguished between a general proposition (the thesis) and its application to a particular situation (the hypothesis). While the thesis of the "Syllabus" was that there should be no separation of church and state, the hypothesis was to consider a particular state wherein there would be religious persecution and anti-clerical attacks if Catholics pressed for a union of church and state. In such a setting, would not the lesser evil be to tolerate a separation of church and state that avoided religious strife and allowed Catholics to be fully accepted in the particular state? And so the Catholic experiment with democratic politics entered a new phase under Leo, however unevenly and with differing degrees of success.

In the past, the Church could defend its institutional interests through its influence and power in dealing with monarchs and aristocracies throughout Europe. Where church and state were united, or at least in close working arrangements, there was little need to call upon the mass of Catholic believers in a state. Once the old ways of doing business were ruptured first by the French Revolution of 1789 and then later revolutions, the papacy and various national church hierarchies looked to Catholics of good will to protect the interests of the Church. In response a variety of social movements emerged that defended the rights of the Church. In Italy, Catholic social movements grew out of concern about the seizure of Papal States, along with other properties and institutions. Pius IX's earlier ban on Catholics taking part in the politics of the new Italian state left Church-affiliated or Church-sponsored lay initiatives as the only avenue for social activism. Under the umbrella organization, "Opera dei Congressi," a substantial "network of banks, mutual benefit societies, and recreational and cultural associations, as well as a flourishing press" developed.[8]

For the most part the leaders of the "Opera" adopted a stance of opposition to the Italian state while winning over the hearts of many Italians through social and charitable services. By the late 1880s Leo had come to think that it was not possible to work out a modus vivendi with the Italian state and he backed the "Opera" in its stance of opposition. Some of those active in the "Opera" were committed to Christian Democracy and sought to emulate the agenda of the French Catholic liberals in Italy; first, by ending the Church's withdrawal from Italian politics, and second, by encouraging lay Catholics to form political parties that would have autonomy from the Vatican. Leo was appreciative of these groups of mostly young Catholics, but he was also wary that they would be beyond his control in taking initiatives. In many ways, *Graves de Communi*, an encyclical written ten years after *Rerum Novarum*, was aimed at this approach to Christian Democracy.

The phrase 'Christian Democracy' had come into use after Leo's labour encyclical as a description of the many movements of social Catholicism that had sprung up in response to *Rerum Novarum*. It grew even more common in usage following Leo's efforts to rally French Catholic support for the Third Republic. And so, by 1901 when he wrote *Graves de Communi*, Leo himself used the expression. However, Leo never meant that Christian democracy entailed

[8]Bokenkotter, *Church and Revolution*, 240.

religious toleration, freedom of the press, popular sovereignty, and other liberal freedoms. For the pope, Christian Democracy was simply another term for social Catholicism, lay Catholic activity on behalf of the poor of a society. To Leo's way of thinking, Christian Democracy was closer to the ideal of a government for the people, but not by the people. Chadwick's judgment of Leo is apt: "He was the first pope to say a yes to democracy; a qualified yes, but a nod of assent at the possibility."[9]

Pius X, who succeeded Leo, was even more concerned than Leo about the autonomy of Catholic organizations and in 1904 disbanded the "Opera dei Congressi" at the national level and put all regional groups under the control of diocesan bishops. Then in 1907 he issued the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis*, which was an attack on the vague error called Modernism. The attack on Modernist ideas went well beyond the intellectual circles of theologians, philosophers, historians, and others to suppress just about any group that the conservatives disapproved of and that included proponents of democracy. The accusation of modernism also led to the suppression of the French movement Le Sillon (The Furrow or The Path), founded by Marc Sangnier, which was aimed at encouraging Catholic participation in the Republic.

In Belgium, Holland, Germany and Austria—countries with parliamentary governments—there were Catholic political parties, but they started out with the purpose of defending the rights of the Church against anti-clerical liberal parties. These early Catholic parties, which avoided Pius's condemnation, moved in the direction of social Catholicism during Leo's papacy, but they steered clear for the most part of asserting independence from church authority. They should be distinguished from what would later in the twentieth century come to be called Christian Democracy, a political movement with the aim of promoting pluralistic democracy as the system of government most in accord with a Christian understanding of politics.[10]

With the death of Pius X and the election of Benedict XV in 1914, the integralist Catholicism of Pius and curial officials lost its momentum. World War I broke out in August of that year, a tragic event that would transform Italy and make possible new political arrangements. After the war, Italy was "divided and turbulent, leaning to the left, with a broken economy and no leader to pull the

[9]Chadwick, *History of the Popes 1830-1914*, 330.
[10]Sigmund, "Catholicism and Liberal Democracy," 223-224.

country together."[11] Yet the war had also changed the consciousness of Italians, making them aware of a shared national identity and destiny. In that transformed social climate, a Sicilian priest, Don Luigi Sturzo promoted his new party, the "Il Partito Popolare" (IPP), The People's Party, one that embraced much of the economic ideals of *Rerum Novarum* along with democratic political reform including freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, land reform, suffrage for women, and opposition to imperialism. The IPP was organized by Sturzo and built upon Catholic social teachings, but it was not to be a Catholic party. Its independence from the Vatican was evident in that the party did not include any reference to settlement of the "Roman Question," viz. the dispute between the Vatican and the Italian government over the seizure of papal lands and goods, as well as the temporal power of the papacy in the new nation of Italy. The silence on that issue, along with the endorsement of freedom of religion, led to tension between the Vatican and the IPP.

> Despite the popularity of democracy as an ideal after 1918,
>
> the upper echelons of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church remained unconvinced of the virtues and benefits of parliamentary government... Even more significantly, Catholic political parties did not prove themselves to be very effective in defending the Church's most fundamental interests.[12]

Benedict and high-ranking members of his curia often found themselves disappointed not only by Sturzo and the IPP in Italy, but also by the diffidence of Catholic members of parliaments in other European nations towards the Church's political agenda. This lack of enthusiasm within the Vatican for the agenda of Christian Democratic parties only grew after the death of Benedict and the election in 1922 of Pius XI.

As Mussolini and his Fascist party grew in power during the 1920s, the Vatican came to believe that lacking an effective moderate political force, the Italian people would be faced with a choice between the Fascists and Socialist extremes. The new pope and his advisors retained the traditional Vatican discomfort with claims of democratic egalitarianism, which made it less critical of the right-wing movements that were rising. Mussolini was smart enough to recognize he could make the IPP irrelevant in the eyes of the Vatican

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[11]Bokenkotter, *Church and Revolution*, 275.

[12]John Pollard, *The Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism 1914-1958*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 231.

if he could demonstrate that he would be attentive to the institutional self-interest of the Church's hierarchy. In a January 1923 secret meeting, less than three months after becoming Prime Minister, the Fascist leader met with Cardinal Gasparri, the Vatican's Secretary of State. Mussolini had already announced several policies that pleased the Vatican prior to the meeting: a rise in stipend payments to the clergy and the reintroduction of religious education in the primary schools. After the meeting, Gasparri concluded that Mussolini was someone "with whom one could do business."[13]

The Vatican and Mussolini came to a resolution of the Roman Question with the signing of the Lateran Treaty in 1929, which created the independent Vatican City-State, settled outstanding financial claims by the Holy See against the Italian state for its seizure of papal lands, and established formal relations between the Vatican and the Italian state with regard to freedoms and privileges the state would acknowledge in any future policies toward the Catholic Church. Pius XI and Gasparri were especially concerned to maintain the right of various Catholic Action groups to continue being independent from the government, but with oversight by the Catholic clergy. Although much smaller in number than just a decade earlier, these Catholic Action organizations preserved a modest realm of freedom in an authoritarian state and proved helpful after the war to help build a new Christian Democrat party in Italy. "The continued existence of strong Catholic organizations meant that leading Catholic circles also retained the possibility of taking a critical look at Italy's political and social development and of considering the future that lay beyond a possible collapse of Fascism."[14] One must ask, however, whether this was an intentional plan on the part of the Vatican or simply a happy but unanticipated outcome. When one examines not only the Vatican's dealings with Mussolini in Italy, but also with Salazar in Portugal, and Franco in Spain the judgment of Sigmund seems on target: "There seemed to be an affinity, not between Catholicism and totalitarianism, but between the Vatican and authoritarian regimes that were willing to grant the church certain rights in the areas of education and marriage."[15]

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[13]Pollard, *Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism*, 137. I rely on Pollard's excellent volume for the entire paragraph. The Gasparri quote that Pollard cites is from the second volume of the Cardinal's memoirs.

[14]Karl-Egon Lönne, "The Origins of Christian Democratic Parties in Germany, Italy and France after 1943-45," in Gregory Baum and John Coleman, ed., *The Church and Christian Democracy*, Concilium 193, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987, 3-13 at 4.

[15]Sigmund, "Catholicism and liberal democracy," 225.

The reconciliation between the Vatican and the Italian state was "undoubtedly one of the high points of the pontificate of Pius XI and certainly his greatest achievement. Indeed, it must be regarded as one of the key turning points in the history of the modern papacy." Through the Lateran Treaty, the papacy regained some temporal power, secured the financial stability of the Vatican, and reinserted the Church in a stronger way within Italian society. "But all this had been achieved at a cost, recognizing and effectively morally underwriting Mussolini's Fascist Regime."[16] The legacy of Pius XI reveals that the Catholic Church was still no strong supporter of democracy, almost four decades into the twentieth century.

Democracy Endorsed

Eugenio Pacelli became Pius XII in March of 1939, following the death of Pius XI. Pacelli had been the Secretary of State under his predecessor and served as papal nuncio to Germany prior to that. Pacelli's earlier work on a concordat with Hitler's regime and his quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomatic activities as pope during the war left him open to accusations that he did too little to resist the Third Reich and assist the victims of it.

War broke out six months after Pius XII was elected to the papal office. As pope he had to deal first with Mussolini, then Hitler, and then Stalin. Although officially neutral during the war, Pius engaged in a variety of decisions that tilted the Vatican toward the allied cause. It was during the war years and its immediate aftermath, that the Vatican lost its ambivalence toward democracy and the liberal ideals of social and political equality. Pius XII devoted his 1944 Christmas radio address to the topic of Democracy and Peace. He observed that people today "are becoming more and more resentful of the exclusive claims of a dictatorial authority which allows no control or discussion, and are demanding a system of government more consistent with the dignity and liberty of the citizen."[17]

Although wary that such a popular mood could endorse approaches to government that might lead to abuses, he reminded his listeners that according to church teaching, "'it is not forbidden to prefer temperate, popular forms of government, without prejudice, however, to Catholic teaching on the origin and use of authority,' and that 'the Church does not disapprove of any of the various forms of government, provided they be per se capable of securing the good of

[16]Pollard, *Papacy in the Age of Totalitarianism*, 158-59.
[17]Pius XII, "Democracy and Peace," Christmas Address, 1944, n. 12.

the citizens.'"[18] Pius expressed various caveats and warnings about false ideas of democracy, but also acknowledged that "especially in our day when the activity of the state is so vast and decisive, the democratic form of government appears to many as a postulate of nature imposed by reason itself."[19]

So the general principle that democracy was the most apt form of government in a post-World War II climate was established. What remained was ironing out the specifics, which would take time. Although Pius acknowledged the general principle, he also maintained that a central role must be given to the truths of Catholic faith. How that was to be done in a pluralistic society was unclear. Even into the late forties, when the Christian Democrats were in control of the Italian government, there were Vatican figures putting "forward a proposal for a State that was not exactly modelled on modern democracy—the Catholic State, similar to that ruled by Franco in Spain, in which only the 'truth' has the right to freedom, error being allowed at most the chance of toleration."[20]

In the post-war years, there was also the powerful influence of the United States, now the dominant political power, that looked to Pius XII and the Vatican to help stave off the socialists and communists in Italy. A great deal of money flowed from the U.S. to Italy and other Western European nations to avoid additional countries falling into the orbit of the Soviet Union as the "Iron Curtain" descended on much of Eastern Europe. The U.S. style of pluralistic democracy and constitutional separation of church and state was not, however, congenial to Pius or most Vatican officials.

Beyond the so-called "Roman Party," a group of curial officials conservative in outlook, who promoted the idea of the "Catholic State," there were more moderate voices. Domenico Tardini, the Foreign Minister, urged Pius XII to avoid too close a relationship with the Christian Democrats. He was not opposed to the party, but felt that the Church should not be seen as putting its prestige behind any party in a partisan contest. However, Giovanni Montini (later Paul VI), served as Under Secretary of State, and was personally close to many Christian Democrats. Montini thought it crucial that Catholicism be represented in the political realm. A supporter of Jacques Maritain's ideas about democracy, Montini agreed with Maritain's emphasis on "the necessity of engagement by Catholics in

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[18]Pius XII, Christmas Address, 1944, n. 14, quoting Leo XIII, *Libertas*, 1888.

[19]Pius XII, Christmas Address, 1944, n. 19.

[20]Andrea Riccardi, "The Vatican of Pius XII and the Catholic Party," in Baum and Coleman, *The Church and Christian Democracy*, 37-51 at 46-47.

the sphere of politics through the concrete instrument of a political party."[21]

The influence of Maritain, not only on Montini, but on many Catholics' attitude toward democracy was the most significant intellectual element in the development of Christian Democracy as a political movement. His arguments for a Christian Democratic state painted a portrait of the democratic welfare-states that were emerging in Western Europe. Along with other Catholic philosophers like Heinrich Rommen and Yves Simon, Maritain pushed the idea that democracy was not only acceptable within the Catholic tradition, but was "the one political structure that was most in keeping with human nature and Christian values."[22] Maritain became the philosopher of both European and Latin American Christian Democratic parties.

In Italy it was Alcide de Gasperi who founded the Christian Democrat party, bringing together former members of Sturzo's PPI and younger Catholics who had been engaged in Catholic Action groups during the Fascist era. Gasperi and the party he led, defended a pluralistic parliamentary democracy not entirely to the liking of the Vatican. The Christian Democrat Union in West Germany led by Konrad Adenauer and its sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union, brought together various groups to forge a moderate, non-confessional party that endorsed pluralist democracy along with a regulated free-market economy. In France, those Catholics who had joined the Resistance in the later years of Nazi occupation helped establish the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP) in 1944. Led by George Bidault and inspired by Catholic social teaching, the MRP sought to reach out beyond Catholic circles to fashion a party that linked the ideas of Catholic thinkers like Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier with ideals of the French Revolution to espouse a democratic, personalist and communitarian social vision. The party was never able to gain a parliamentary majority, but was often an essential partner in coalition governments after the war.

A striking development among these parties was that they all moved past the idea that a main part of their purpose was to defend the rights and privileges of the Catholic Church. Committed to pluralistic democracies, post-war Christian Democracy was lay-led and independent of the Vatican, even if Catholic social teaching was often evident in the way these parties articulated their platforms. Many post-war Christian Democrat parties were coalitions of at least

[21]Riccardi, "Pius XII and the Catholic Party," 40.
[22]Sigmund, "Catholicism and liberal democracy," 226.

two groups. There were those who were oriented toward social reform and harboured doubts about capitalism, while another group was often focused on anti-communist policies and economic programs that appealed to the interests of the middle-class. It was this latter group that was boosted by American financial aid programs and which received the blessing of conservative Catholic hierarchs. That support helped the Christian Democrats attain political power rather quickly, especially in Germany and Italy.[23] Similar outcomes happened in Belgium and Holland where the national hierarchies, more than the Vatican, wound up encouraging Catholic unity in the political sphere. France was the exception, despite the existence of the MRP, in having an array of parties with Catholic membership due to its strong pluralist tradition.[24]

Democracy Promoted

Prior to the convocation of Vatican II, things were already changing significantly under John XXIII who became pope in 1958. His style was pastoral and he operated with "a clear distinction between the papacy and the republic of Italy." As a consequence, the pope's Italian policy was characterized by a "spirit of harmonious collaboration, which translated into a certain 'disengagement' (*disimpegno*) and 'reserve' (*riserbo*)."[25] John withdrew the Vatican from the partisan political party battles in which it had been immersed. In so doing, John was going against powerful curial officials who "defended the hierarchy's right and duty to issue commands in the political and social sphere. These cardinals argued that the bishops *alone* were competent to judge the legitimacy of political 'coalitions' or 'alliances.'"[26] John's "reserve" was really a choice to give the Catholic laity, as politicians and as voters, some space to exercise their independent judgment in the arena of politics.

In the spring of 1963, John issued his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. In part one of the document, he endorsed an array of universal and inviolable rights and duties of the human person, including the right to worship God according to one's conscience.[27] Although the

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[23]Gregory Baum and John Coleman, "Editorial," in Baum and Coleman, *The Church and Christian Democracy*, xvii-xxiv at xx.

[24]Riccardi, "Pius XII and the Catholic Party," 42.

[25]Marvin Mich, "Commentary on *Mater et magistra*" in Kenneth R. Himes, ed., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, 2nd ed., Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2018, 199-225 at 203.

[26]Mich, "Commentary on *Mater et magistra*," 203.

[27]John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, n. 14, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html

theological and philosophical foundation of this right would come two years later in the conciliar decree *Dignitatis Humanae*, John had by his endorsement of a right that had been condemned as folly by previous popes, put the Catholic Church in a new position to address the question of democracy in a pluralistic society.

John also acknowledged the widespread belief that all people "are equal in natural dignity,"[28] undercutting Leo XIII's claim that there are appropriate inequalities of dignity and status. Finally, the showed restraint in prescribing details of what forms of government are preferable, for that must be determined with respect to the concrete historical situation of a political community.[29] His concern was simply that whatever form of government was adapted, it be a state that genuinely serves the common good and protects the rights and duties of each member of the society.

The Second Ecumenical Council at the Vatican, 1962-65, issued two documents of importance for shaping the agenda of Catholicism's relationship with democracy. The decree on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, focused on the specific issue of religious freedom and its foundation in the dignity of the person. As noted earlier, even after the Vatican had accepted political democracy, it still had not come to terms with pluralism as the social context for a democratic polity. The Church seemed unable to move beyond the thesis/hypothesis formulation of the nineteenth century.

The Council was influenced by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but also by the experience of local churches where religious pluralism necessitated the Church learn various methods of co-existence and cooperation with a non-Catholic state. On this latter point, the experience of the U.S. Catholic Church was a significant factor for perhaps the first time in Catholic thinking about democracy, largely due to the intellectual contribution of John Courtney Murray as a *peritus* at the Council.[30]

Yet, the American influence did not extend to the Church's support for the U.S. policy of a constitutional separation of church and state.

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[28]John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 44.

[29]"[I]t is not possible to give a general ruling on the most suitable form of government, or the ways in which civil authorities can most effectively fulfill their legislative, administrative, and judicial functions." n. 67. "In determining what form a particular government shall take, and the way in which it shall function, a major consideration will be the prevailing circumstances and the condition of the people; and these are things which vary in different places and at different times." n. 68.

[30]Leslie Griffin, "Commentary on Dignitatis humanae," in Himes, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 252-274, esp. 254-260.

Nowhere does *Dignitatis Humanae* forbid the establishment of religion, as in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. During debates over the conciliar decree, there was both support and opposition regarding the practice of concordats between the Church and states. A third group, led by the Dutch Cardinal Bernard Alfrink maintained that the question could not be resolved by a doctrinal statement nor in any a priori manner. Rather, the right of religious freedom must be secured equally for all citizens. "Thus nations may maintain an establishment—or not—as long as they protect the religious freedom of all individuals and communities."[31] Fear of religious pluralism would no longer prevent embracing democracy for the Church did not demand a privileged role in a state.

The other conciliar document related to the topic of democracy is the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Gaudium et Spes*. While many of its themes pertain to a Catholic vision of temporal politics, its direct comment about forms of government was general. In chapter 4 of Part Two of the document, the council examined the life of the political community. It was noted that a desire evident among people was "to assume a larger role in organizing the life of the political community" and this for the purpose of protecting minorities, promoting cooperation, and preventing the corruption or overreaching of political authority.[32] The "Pastoral Constitution" then echoed the "reserve" of John XXIII that, "According to the character of different peoples and their historic development, the political community can, however, adopt a variety of concrete solutions in its structures and the organization of public authority." Importantly, it went on to observe:

> It is in full conformity with human nature that there should be juridico-political structures providing all citizens in an ever better fashion and without any discrimination the practical possibility of freely and actively taking part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community and in the direction of public affairs, in fixing the terms of reference of the various public bodies and in the election of political leaders. All citizens, therefore, should be mindful of the right and also the duty to use their free vote to further the common good.[33]

Clearly, the council wished to acknowledge the ambition for greater participation in the making of decisions that touch upon the

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[31]Leslie Griffin, "Commentary on *Dignitatis humanae*," in Himes, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 252-274 at 265.

[32] Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, n. 73, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

[33]Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75.

lives of individuals and their communities. Further, the process of voting and shaping the laws of a society are viewed as appropriate concerns for all citizens. Hence, political systems like democracy would appear to be favoured precisely because such systems permit a fuller participation by citizens in the organization of social life. Nonetheless, the Church is not to be "bound to any political system."[34]

The papacies of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, though different in many ways, do not diverge greatly from one another on the issue of political democracy. In his apostolic letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, written prior to the 1971 Synod, Paul VI commented on the many social changes occurring around the world and observed, "two aspirations persistently make themselves felt" in these new contexts: "the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation."[35] The pope stated that these two aspirations are two forms of human dignity and freedom. Paul also maintained,

> The two aspirations to equality and to participation, seek to promote a democratic type of society. Various models are proposed, some are tried out, none of them gives complete satisfaction, and the search goes on between ideological and pragmatic tendencies. The Christian has the duty to take part in this search and in the organization and life of political society.[36]

As with the decision of Vatican II, there was no endorsement of a specific form of democracy, but there was a clear indication that democratic political institutions seem best suited to the spirit of the age and the quest of people for dignity and freedom evident in the aspirations for equality and participation. We are clearly in a different era than that of Pius IX's *Non Expedit* and Leo XIII's *Quod Apostolici Muneris*.

The papacy of John Paul II was momentous on many levels, including papal social teaching. In his initial encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, the new pope made a bold statement that served as a lodestar for the social teachings that were to follow in his long papacy. Commenting on the mystery of the Incarnation and the claim that the second member of the Trinity entered into history and assumed a human nature, the pope wrote, "In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man's worth and dignity is the Gospel, that

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[34]Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75.

[35] Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971, n. 22, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html

[36]Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, n. 24.

is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity."[37] Proclaiming and promoting human dignity was at the centre of John Paul's social teaching. Building upon John XXIII's use of human rights as the centrepiece of *Pacem in Terris*, John Paul would consistently rely upon human rights to express Catholic social teaching on human dignity.

When the collapse of the Soviet bloc began in 1989 the pope was faced with an array of nations seeking to restore liberties and fashion political and economic institutions appropriate to the time. In this new environment John Paul spoke again and again about the opportunities, but also the risks, entailed in nations reinventing themselves. In 1991, commemorating the centennial of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul took the opportunity to assess the events of 1989.[38] Without denying the focus of the events in that year happened in Central and Eastern Europe, the pope claimed that a longer and geographically broader process had been going on since the decade of the 1980s, for "certain dictatorial and oppressive regimes fell one by one in some countries of Latin American and also of Africa and Asia." He proceeded to comment approvingly, "from this historical process new forms of democracy have emerged which offer a hope for change in fragile political and social structures."[39] Later in the text, John Paul offered a more general judgment about democracy,

> The church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.[40]

The post-conciliar affirmation of democracy continued into the papacy of Benedict XVI. Befitting a pope who was a theologian active in both the academy and the church, he addressed the underlying foundation of an authentic democracy. Benedict challenged the view of a well-known philosopher, Hans Kelsen who argued decades earlier that relativism was the basic philosophy of democracy. For Kelsen, truth is created out of political dialogue and debate, whereas Benedict (and his predecessors before him) would argue that all politics is subject to a truth that is beyond politics and which stands

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[37] John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1979, n. 10, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html

[38] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, ns. 22-29, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

[39] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 22.

[40] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46.

in judgment over it. In the pope's mind, "if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident."[41] Rather "real democracy" is "founded on the ethical values rooted in human nature itself."[42]

Yet this foundation is not so detailed in its prescriptions that all is dictated in advance. Benedict expressed an appreciation for the reality of pluralism and the limits of what a democratic state may do to promote a unitary social vision. At a meeting in the U.K. of British politicians and other societal officials, the pope praised the British parliamentary system noting that, "Britain has emerged as a pluralist democracy which places great value on freedom of speech, freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law, with a strong sense of the individual's rights and duties, and of the equality of all citizens before the law. While couched in different language, Catholic social teaching has much in common with this approach." Clearly, the "Catholic social teaching" that Benedict alludes to is its post-conciliar formulation, not that of the 19th century. In the same set of remarks, the pope also commented that "the Holy See and the United Kingdom have welcomed the spread of democracy, especially in the last sixty-five years."[43]

In an oft-quoted thesis, the late political scientist Samuel Huntington proposed that between 1974 and 1990 the world experienced a "third wave of democratization." He noted that the "third wave" was overwhelmingly a Catholic one, of the thirty nations that moved into democracy during the period, most were predominantly Catholic.[44] In Latin America, the Iberian peninsula, Eastern and Central Europe, and the Philippines, the democratic process was dominant. Huntington also noted that a major factor in this development was the Catholic Church's strong support for democracy. While there has been backsliding among some of those new democracies in Huntington's third wave, the Catholic Church's support for democracy has, if anything, become even

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[41] Benedict XVI, "Meeting with the Representatives of British Society," 2010, London: Westminster Hall, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile.html

[42] Benedict XVI, "General Audience on Topic of Apostolic Journey to Croatia," 2011, Rome: St. Peter's Square, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110608.html

[43] Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Representatives of British Society."

[44] Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

stronger. Witness the latest encyclical of the present pope as an illustration.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis is less concerned with possible forms or structures of governance and is more focused on a transformed political culture within which the lives of individuals, nations, and international society occurs. He laments the dangers of a false populism or a liberalism at the service of the rich and powerful. For him, democracy is "government by the people," and he warns against eliminating the role of 'the people' from politics in an effort to purge a false populism.[45] For Francis, there is a consistent need, present in every age and culture, to reach out to the margins of a society, to strive for greater inclusivity, and equal standing. This is evident in his remarks on economic life, but it is also true when he speaks about politics.

> What is needed is a model of social, political and economic participation 'that can include popular movements and invigorate local, national and international governing structures with that torrent of moral energy that springs from including the excluded in the building of a common destiny.'[46]

Incorporating all the people in political decision-making requires that the rest of a society "acknowledge that, without them [the marginalized] 'democracy atrophies, turns into a mere word, a formality; it loses its representative character and becomes disembodied, since it leaves out the people in their daily struggle for dignity, in the building of their future.'"[47] In the writing of Francis the emphasis given to creating institutions, organizations, and associations that are inclusive and diverse is notable, and that emphasis translates into an outlook that presumes authentic democratic political structures are best suited to meet the needs of people today.[48]

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[45] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, n. 157, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

[46]Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 169, quoting himself, "Address to Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements," 28 October 2014, *AAS* 106 (2014) 858.

[47]Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 169, quoting himself, "Address to Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements," 5 November 2016, *L'Osservatore Romano*, November 7-8, 2016, 4-5.

[48]Francis, "Meeting with Government Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps," Asunción, Paraguay (July 10, 2015): I encourage you to continue working to strengthen the democratic structures and institutions, so that they can respond to the legitimate aspirations of the nation's people. The form of government adopted by your Constitution, a "representative, participative and pluralistic democracy" based on the promotion of and respect for human rights, must banish the temptation to be

Conclusion

It is obvious from the above survey of history that the Catholic Church's relationship with modern democracy has been complicated. Catholic social teaching has undergone an evolution in grasping what historical forms of the state satisfy the normative idea of a good state. Monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy have all been suggested as acceptable, and at different times one or the other has been deemed preferable. With the passage of time, the papal stance toward democracy has evolved to the point that there is strong support for democracy as the most apt form of government. The claim is not that democracy is always and everywhere the ideal form of government, but simply that it is most suitable for today, given modernity's emphasis on self-determination, freedom, participation, and equality.

Finally, I offer five brief reflections upon the history of Catholicism and political democracy. First, there were significant differences in how Catholics of various nation-states came to embrace democracy. Yet too often the experience of democracy outside of Europe, or even outside of Italy, was overshadowed by the Vatican's role in Italian politics.

Second, and a related concern, the Papal States often preoccupied church officials and skewed Vatican judgments. Worries about preserving the temporal power of popes undercut the spiritual and moral mission of the papacy at crucial moments. There is a legitimate concern that the papacy enjoy autonomy and independence from any political authority, but the Papal States were hardly the only way to address the concern. Ironically, the desire to hold onto the Papal States led to political alliances and arrangements that compromised the papacy's independence at various times throughout its history.

Third, while there was important clerical leadership in the early stages of Christian Democracy, it was "the attitude of the Catholic laity that brought a new vitality to movements of political Catholicism."[49] And, though it could not be addressed in this short essay, the narrative of Catholic activism on behalf of democracy extends beyond the story of political parties to include labour unions, movements on behalf of social justice and peace, intellectual debate, student groups, and an array of organizations under the banner of Catholic Action.

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satisfied with a purely formal democracy, one which, as Aparecida put it, is content with being "founded on fair election procedures" (*Aparecida Document*, 74). That is a purely formal democracy.

[49]Martin Conway, *Catholic Politics in Europe 1918-1945*, London: Routledge, 1997, 5.

Fourth, the narrative of Catholicism and democracy offers ample evidence that Catholic social teaching evolves out of interaction between religious beliefs and social experience. "Through the back-and-forth movement between normative Catholic beliefs and lived experience, notable developments have occurred,"[50] both in formal teaching issued by the hierarchy and in practical commitments made by lay Catholics to participate in and promote democratic regimes.

Finally, it is striking that the onset of pluralistic democracy was perceived as a direct challenge to the self-interest of the papacy and the institutional Church and yet the Catholic community, over time and with many missteps, was capable of coming to terms with it to such a degree that today the Catholic Church is now seen as a major promoter of political democracy.

[50]David Hollenbach, SJ, "Human Dignity in Catholic Thought," Marcus Düwell, Jens Braavig, Roger Brownsword, Dietmar Mieth, ed., *Cambridge Handbook on Human Dignity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 250-259 at 256.