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THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM

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Thank you for honouring me with the invitation to deliver the millennial Acton Lecture for The Centre for Independent Studies.

In discussing the religious encounter with democracy, and more specifically Catholicism and democracy, I hope to develop several themes in the religious interaction with modern history that were of intense interest to Lord Acton. In describing history as the history of liberty, and in stressing the central role of Christianity in the history of liberty, Lord Acton challenged the conventional historiography of his time (and ours) and helped make possible the developments in Catholic social doctrine I shall be discussing this evening. These developments are, I think, of interest far beyond the formal boundaries of the Catholic Church, and engage the concerns of Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and all men and women of good will who are concerned about the future of democracy.

Let me begin, however, not with Lord Acton, but with another distinguished British historian.

In the early 1980s, Sir Michael Howard, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, suggested in a conversation that there had been two great twentieth-century revolutions. The first was in 1917, when Lenin's Bolsheviks expropriated the Russian people's revolution and launched the world's first totalitarian state. The second was going on as we spoke—the evolution of the Catholic Church into the world's premier institutional defender of human rights.

I remembered this intriguing proposal a few years later, when Sir Michael's two great twentieth-century revolutions intersected in the "Revolution of 1989" in east central Europe. And, for the moment at least, the answer to Stalin's cynical question, "How many divisions has the Pope?" was given: a sufficiency, thank you.

That the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II played a significant role in the Revolution of 1989 and the collapse of European communism is now recognised by scholars and statesmen alike. But how did this come to be? How did the Catholic Church, for so long identified with the politics of altar-and-throne alliances, become a defender of the democratic project in history? Did this transformation include a wrenching change in Catholic doctrine? Was it simply the response of a pragmatic and venerable institution to changing social conditions? Or was something else afoot? And as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, how did the Church appraise the democratic project it had helped bring to what seemed, a decade ago, a moment of unalloyed triumph?

These questions are not of abstract interest only. Crossing the threshold of the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church is the largest religious community on the planet, numbering some 1.1 billion adherents. The demographic centre of world Catholicism is in Latin America, which is struggling, with varying degrees of success, to secure the democratic and market transitions of the 1980s. Poland, the most intensely Catholic country on earth, was the spear-point for the crack-up of the external Soviet empire and is the largest new democracy in east central Europe. Ukraine, where the Greek Catholic Church was the chief institutional repository of national identity during decades of Stalinization and attempted russification, is a struggling new democracy in eastern Europe and a country whose continued independence is the single most important geo-political barrier to Russian great power ambitions. Asia's only majority-Christian country, the Philippines, is enjoying another chance at democracy, in part because of the Catholic Church's role in the 1986 overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship. Catholics are 25% of the population of the United States, the lead society among world democracies. These demographic factors alone suggest that the Church's engagement with the democratic project will have a lot to do with the politics of democracy in the twenty-first century.

But more is at issue here than politics, narrowly construed. If by "democracy" we mean, not simply certain electoral, legislative, executive and judicial procedures, but *a way of public life* characterised by equality before the law, participatory decision-making, civility, justice, and a commitment to both individual liberty and the common good, then there is an irreducible *moral* dimension to the democratic project. There can be no democracy in the institutional sense unless there is a critical mass of democrats in a society. That critical mass—"civil society"—is formed by moral convictions: about rights and duties, about the proper relationship between the governors and the governed, about the rule of law and the norms of public justice. The formation of Catholic consciences through the Church's teaching on these matters will have a considerable impact on the democratic future, and not simply in countries where Catholics are a significant part of the local population.

Exploring the relationship of the Catholic Church to the democratic project today also requires coming to grips with the teaching of Pope John Paul II, which, as an authentic, authoritative expression of the Second Vatican Council, will shape the Catholic Church for centuries to come. John Paul's analysis of democracy has been evolving over the twenty-two years of his pontificate, even as he helped shape the democratic transitions in the Philippines, Chile and Argentina, East-Central Europe, and Central America. Moreover, his diagnosis of the internal threats to democracy in the new century seems to have anticipated many of the recent points of debate within both old and new democracies. Clarifying the points of both affirmation and critique in John Paul's analysis of "real existing democracy" thus provides a useful survey of the moral terrain on which the question, "whither democracy?", is being contested.

Let us begin by taking a step back in time, tracing in broad strokes the history of the Catholic engagement with the democratic project between the emergence of the first democratic states in the late

eighteenth century and the pontificate of John Paul II. Then, we shall be in a position to understand more clearly both John Paul's analysis of democracy today and the questions his pontificate poses for the democratic future.

I.

In assessing the Catholic Church's stance toward democracy in the early modern age, the dominance of European affairs in the minds of the popes of that period cannot be overestimated. Nor can the difficulties the Church experienced in Europe from the French Revolution through World War I be underestimated. Hardly any decade in this period was without its crises.

Pope Pius VI (1775-1799) died a prisoner of the French armies which had previously deposed him as head of the Papal States; at his death on August 29, 1799, it was widely assumed that the papacy was a spent force in world affairs.¹ Pius VII (1800-1823) was kidnapped by Napoleon and forced to live in French captivity for three years; the revolutions in Latin America during his pontificate posed new questions about legitimate political authority and for Church-state relations. The Papal States were under French and Austrian occupation for seven years of the pontificate of Gregory XVI (1831-1846), who also found himself caught between the Church's classic understanding of the rights of duly-constituted public authority and the quest for independence of the fiercely Catholic Poles during the 1830-31 Polish revolt against czarist rule. During the lengthy pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878), the Papal States were lost, the pope became the "prisoner of the Vatican", and half the Prussian hierarchy was imprisoned during Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*. Anti-Catholicism was rampant in France during the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878-1903), despite the pope's efforts to rally French Catholics to the Third Republic. Under Pius X (1903-1914), France broke diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1904, and at the insistence of Italy (supported by Great Britain), Benedict XV (1914-1922) was excluded by a secret clause of the Treaty of London from any participation in the post-World War I peace conference.² Throughout the 19th century, tens of thousands of clergy and religious were expelled from their European homelands; monastic life was virtually destroyed in some countries, the monks of the venerable Solesmes monastery being dragged from their choir stalls by the local public authorities; and the French government marked the opening of the 20th century by closing 2,500 Catholic schools. These were not, to put it gently, the historical circumstances in which the popes might have been expected to take a very benign view of that new form of political organization called "democracy." Rather than bringing with it a new springtime of religious freedom, the turn toward democracy in Europe had produced new theories of state supremacy and new policies of ecclesial subjugation. By 1900, some European states wanted to act like churches far more than the Church wanted to be a state.³

The *locus classicus* for what is taken to be the nineteenth century papacy's rejection of all things modern, including democracy, is Pope Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, in which the last of the condemned propositions is that "the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself to and agree with progress, liberalism, and modern civilisation". Caricatures of "Pio No-No" aside, it is important to grasp just what

Pius IX meant by “liberalism”, and why it seemed such a profound threat. To the Roman pontiffs of the mid-19th century, “liberalism” in public affairs meant anti-clericalist politics based on the claim that man’s autonomous reason was the first and indeed only principle of political organization—a claim that drove transcendent moral norms from public life. “Religious freedom” in this context often meant either religious indifference on the part of governments—“[consigning] the Church to the sacristy while [striving] to secularise every institution of the State”, as one scholar has put it⁴—or active hostility to religion, as the brief sketch above indicated.

The official Catholic evaluation of democracy in the first three-quarters or so of the 19th century was, therefore, inextricably bound up with the Church-state question. The popes had struggled for centuries to maintain the *libertas ecclesiae*, the Church’s internal freedom of action, in the face of repeated attempts to circumscribe it (by, for example, the monarch playing a major role in appointing bishops and controlling communications between local bishops and the pope). Now, as royal absolutism was breaking down, a new form of absolutism seemed to be emerging: the absolutism of the secular state, determined to bring the Church to heel. The secularisation of the European mind in the nineteenth century, and the new claims of wide-reaching state authority which accompanied that secularisation, were thus among the root causes of the Church’s profound suspicion of democracy.⁵ If democracy meant liberalism, and liberalism meant secularism, and secularism implied a public order in which the Church’s freedom was radically constrained by the state, then there could be no *rapprochement* between Catholicism and democracy.⁶

A different kind of democracy was emerging across the Atlantic, however, as Alexis de Tocqueville tried to explain to his European readers. In the United States, constitutionally-guaranteed religious freedom and the institutional separation of Church and state had not led to religious indifference or governmental hostility toward religion; on the contrary, amidst these expressions of a liberal polity there had developed a vibrant Catholicism that, unlike its European counterparts, still held the allegiance of the working class. As Tocqueville put it, religion was the first of American political institutions: not in the sense of wielding legislative or executive power, but in forming the habits of heart and mind that made democracy possible.⁷

The *fact* of the United States became an important factor in compelling a papal re-examination of the question of religious freedom, and, eventually, of the democratic project. Thus in 1895, Leo XIII wrote the bishops of the United States that the American arrangement—a confessionally-neutral state with religious freedom for all—“could be tolerated” (*tolerari potest*). Still, the preferred arrangement remained one in which, as Leo put it, the Church “enjoyed the favour of the laws and the patronage of the public authority.”⁸

Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) moved the official Catholic discussion of democracy forward with his 1931 social encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, which defined a key principle of Catholic social doctrine: “subsidiarity.”⁹ According to this principle, decision-making and regulatory power should be left at the lowest possible level of society, commensurate with the achievement of the common good. “Subsidiarity” will have different applications in different circumstances. But it is, in all instances, an anti-statist principle,

in that it sets clear boundaries to state power. To borrow from Edmund Burke, it is a principle in defence of society's "small platoons" against the tendency of the modern state to absorb everything into itself. To place this principle at the centre of Catholic social doctrine was to raise a question: what form of government is most likely to acknowledge the limited role of a juridically-constrained state and the moral and social importance of the "small platoons" in a rightly-ordered society?

In actual historical practice, liberal democracies best met the test of the subsidiarity principle. Thus during and immediately after the Second World War, Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) began to suggest that, given the available alternatives (which included the Leninist form of totalitarianism as a real and present danger), democracy offered the best practical means of honouring the subsidiarity principle in concrete political life in the developed world. Pius was supported in this by one of his closest collaborators, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (later Pope Paul VI), who was himself influenced by the political-philosophical work of Jacques Maritain; Maritain's 1942 study, *Christianity and Democracy*, became a philosophical manifesto for the post-war Christian Democratic movements in a shattered Europe.¹⁰

But the question of the Church's teaching on religious freedom—the linchpin in Catholic thinking about the rightly-ordered state—remained to be resolved. That resolution took place at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) was the pivotal moment in the contemporary Catholic appraisal of democracy, for its definition of the fundamental human right of religious freedom (and the fundamental human duty of seeking and adhering to religious truth) had a *public*, as well as personal meaning. Only a state with limited and defined powers could acknowledge that there was a *sanctum sanctorum* in every conscience where state power ought not tread, and could recognise that the state itself stood under the judgment of moral norms that transcended it. Only a state with no pretensions to omnicompetence could acknowledge its *incompetence* in matters theological. Only a state which understood that it existed to serve society could acknowledge the priority and integrity of the free associations of civil society, including religious associations. In brief, *Dignitatis Humanae* and its richly-textured concept of religious freedom implied a certain kind of state which, in contemporary circumstances, is to be found among the liberal democracies.¹¹

The Declaration on Religious Freedom was itself a development of one stream of Catholic thought that had been evolving since the late fifth century, when Pope Gelasius I distinguished between "the consecrated authority of the priesthood and the royal power" in a letter to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius. The "consecrated authority of the priesthood" was a limit on the reach of the "royal power"; the Church's freedom to order its internal life was a limit on the reach of the state. That much was clear from the early medieval investiture controversy on. But in the contemporary world, the Church's teaching authority began to recognise that there were important *public* effects of this notion of parallel but distinct sovereignties. The state's concession of incompetence in spiritual matters desacralized politics. And from a desacralized politics—which must be carefully distinguished from a politics that recognizes no transcendent moral norms by which it can be judged—there emerged, historically, the possibility of a politics of consent

rather than a politics of divine right or its secularised form, a politics of totalitarian coercion.¹²

With the Declaration on Religious Freedom, then, the Catholic Church moved decisively and, I believe, irreversibly beyond the Constantinian period of its history. The Church would no longer seek to buttress its truth-claims with state power. It would make its evangelical proposal to the world, and it would defend the religious freedom of all, with its own unique instruments. The stage was thus set for a different kind of Catholic encounter with the world of politics and a more robust Catholic engagement with the democratic project.¹³ The opportunity for that engagement would be seized by one of the architects of the Declaration on Religious Freedom at Vatican II, Karol Wojtyła, whom the world would know after October 16, 1978, as Pope John Paul II.

II.

According to a widespread journalistic convention, the pontificate of John Paul II is divisible into two parts. In Part One, the “Pope from a far country” bursts onto the world stage as a dynamic advocate of basic human rights, challenging authoritarians of the right (the Philippines’ Marcos, Chile’s Pinochet, Paraguay’s Stroessner) and totalitarians of the left (the Soviet leadership, Poland’s Jaruzelski), while igniting a successful non-violent revolution in east central Europe; Part One of the pontificate culminates in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. In Part Two, John Paul becomes an angry old man, incapable of understanding the world he helped create, a scold out of touch with the aspirations of modernity.¹⁴ This split-screen vision of the pontificate does little justice to what more careful observers have noticed since the beginning of John Paul’s papacy—its remarkable intellectual consistency.

The historical record is better served, and the terms of the Catholic Church’s contemporary engagement with democracy better understood, if the public aspects of the pontificate of John Paul II are seen as variations on a single great theme: the inalienable dignity and value of the human person. That was the theme that animated Karol Wojtyła’s pre-papal philosophical work at the Catholic University of Lublin.¹⁵ And that is the theme that has dominated his address to public affairs as Pope for more than twenty-one years.

The Pope himself made the link between his Christian humanism and the problems and prospects of contemporary democracy during an impromptu press conference en route to Chile in 1987. There had been much press speculation about whether the Pope would defend the democratic project in a Chile then under military dictatorship, and one reporter pressed the question on John Paul during the flight to Latin America from Rome. To which the Pope replied, “I am not the evangeliser of democracy, I am the evangeliser of the Gospel. To the Gospel message, of course, belongs all the problems of human rights, and if democracy means human rights then it also belongs to the message of the Church.”¹⁶

The sequence here was not accidental. Evangelism—the proclamation of the Gospel message of God’s passionate love for the world He created—was first, because evangelism is what popes are for. But the Gospel is not a private matter; it has public implications, which include the defence of basic human rights as a Defense of the dignity and value built into human beings by their Creator. The Church’s evangelization

is, inevitably, culture-forming. A culture inspired by a Christian concept of the human person will affirm certain forms of politics as compatible with the dignity of the human person, and reject others for their incompatibility with that dignity. From evangelism to culture-formation to political change: that has been the public strategy of the entire pontificate of John Paul II.¹⁷

That strategy was deployed with effect three months into the pontificate, when the Pope addressed the entire Latin American episcopate in Puebla, Mexico. This was the first public confrontation between the newly-elected Pope and liberation theology, and John Paul made clear that he found many theological deficiencies in certain forms of this phenomenon: their tendency to reduce the Gospel message to a political program, their depiction of Christ as the revolutionary subversive from Nazareth, their call for a “partisan Church.”¹⁸ In criticising this self-consciously “political theology”, however, John Paul was also aware of its tendency toward a profound scepticism, at times verging on outright hostility, to what liberation theologians considered the “bourgeois formalism” of liberal democracy. Thus John Paul’s Puebla address and its critique of liberation theology can be read as an insightful papal warning against moving the old Latin American fondness for altar-and-throne arrangements from right to left on the political spectrum.¹⁹

John Paul II advanced the Catholic position further in his 1987 social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, which was devoted primarily to Third World development. In this context, the Pope affirmed that “integral development” required what is often called “civil society;” or as John Paul put it, “the developing nations themselves should favour the self-affirmation of each citizen, through access to a wider culture and a free flow of information.”²⁰ But these attributes of civil society were not, by themselves, sufficient, the Pope argued. Integral human development would not take place if Third World people remained the victims of dictatorship; true development required that third world countries “reform certain unjust structures, and in particular their political institutions, in order to replace corrupt, dictatorial, and authoritarian forms of government with democratic and participatory ones.”²¹ Thus in *Sollicitudo* the Pope reconfirmed his support for the democratic revolution then under-way in world politics, because “the health of a political community—as expressed in the free and responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs, in the rule of law, and in respect for and promotion of human rights—is the necessary condition and sure guarantee of the development of the whole individual and of all people.”²²

Another 1987 papal address made clear that the Pope would not be an uncritical celebrant of the democratic possibility, however. Democratic polities had to hold themselves accountable to transcendent moral norms of judgment. This, John Paul suggested in an address in Miami, Florida to President Ronald Reagan, meant deepening the democracies’ understanding of freedom. The Pope reminded his American audience that “ordered freedom” was the American tradition: freedom ordered to “the fullness of human life, to the preservation of human dignity, and to the safeguarding of human rights.” This, and not freedom conceived as radical personal autonomy, was the freedom that “America is called upon to live and guard and transmit.”²³

The collapse of communist regimes in east central Europe in the Revolution of 1989, followed

within twenty months by the collapse of the Soviet Union itself, seemed to vindicate the most exuberant claims of the world's democrats. John Paul II—who had ignited the revolution of conscience that made “1989” possible during his June 1979 pilgrimage to Poland, and who had carefully laid the moral foundations for the creation of a post-communist democracy in Poland during his June 1987 pilgrimage there—certainly shared in the exultation of his Slavic brethren, released from decades of bondage to totalitarianism.²⁴ But, amidst the exultation, the Pope quickly decoded new threats to the dignity of the human person and the well-being of law-governed democracies. Those threats were not material, like Warsaw Pact tanks, or a Soviet SS-18 aimed at one's capital city. Rather, the new danger was in the order of ideas. In both old and new democracies alike, political theorists and politicians were suggesting that democracy was by definition value-neutral—or, as one Polish commentator put it, democracy must be based on a “neutral *Weltanschauung*.”

John Paul, who knew that there is no such thing as a “neutral *Weltanschauung*”, took up these new challenges in his 1991 social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. There, the Pope taught that the Church valued democracy because it fostered citizens' participation in public life and provided for both governance and political change by peaceful means. But John Paul also taught that democracies were not machines that could run of themselves. “Authentic democracy”, he continued, “is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person.” Then the Pope came down to cases, noting that there had recently been suggestions that only “agnosticism and sceptical relativism” could provide the intellectual and cultural foundations of democratic politics; some had even argued that moral truth was fungible and could be determined by plebiscite. This was unacceptable, John Paul argued, for “if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power.” Nor was this a merely theoretical concern, the Pope continued: for the history of the twentieth century had shown how “a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly-disguised totalitarianism.”²⁵

The last word stung. Surely, critics asked, the Pope was not suggesting that the democracies, which had defended freedom from two twentieth century totalitarianisms, risked becoming exemplars of those evil systems? That was, exactly what John Paul was suggesting, but with a crucial difference. A new and subtle form of tyranny was encoded within secularist and relativist ideologies that tried to banish transcendent moral norms from democratic political life. If a democracy did not recognise the reality of those moral norms and their applicability to public life, then conflicts within that democracy could only be resolved through the raw exercise of power by one group—exercising its will through legislation, judicial fiat, or more violent means—on another. The losing faction would, in turn, think that its basic human rights had been violated. And the net result would be the dissolution of democratic political community. There was a new spectre haunting, not just Europe, but the democratic world as a whole: it was the spectre of Weimar Germany, a splendid edifice of finely-calibrated democratic institutions built on wholly insufficient moral-cultural foundations. The only way to exorcise that spectre, John Paul was suggesting, was by re-linking

democracy and moral truth.

John Paul deepened his critique of post-Cold War real existing democracy in the 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which had several things to say about the cultural foundations of democracy. Against the thin concept of freedom as a neutral faculty of choice that could attach itself legitimately to any object (a concept the Belgian Dominican Servais Pinckaers has called the “freedom of indifference”), the Pope proposed freedom for excellence: freedom tethered to truth and ordered to genuine human flourishing.²⁶ There were universal moral norms, John Paul argued, and we can know them by a disciplined reflection on human moral agency. Thus freedom, as Lord Acton had understood a century before, was not simply a matter of personal autonomy, of doing what we like—“I did it my way”, as that notable political theorist, Frank Sinatra, put it. No, true freedom meant doing it the *right* way: freedom was the right to choose freely what we ought to choose, which is the objectively good.

The *fact* of universal moral norms, the Pope continued, had important consequences for democracy. Recognising that everyone is equally responsible before the demands of these universal moral norms is the sturdiest foundation on which to defend the bedrock democratic principle of political and legal equality in a world in which human beings are palpably unequal in many other respects. The bonds of civic friendship are better secured, John Paul continued, by a mutual recognition of moral obligations arising from common moral standards to compliment contractual obligation. A public recognition of universally applicable moral standards was also crucial, he suggested, in dealing with the temptations posed by what Zbigniew Brzezinski had styled the “permissive cornucopia.”²⁷

His critics charged that, in raising these points, John Paul was revealing himself as an authoritarian. He was doing nothing of the sort. In the 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, the Pope had stated, explicitly, “The Church proposes; she imposes nothing.”²⁸ That was demonstrably not true of certain moments in history, a fact of which John Paul, who was urging the Church to cleanse its conscience on the edge of the third millennium, was fully aware.²⁹ But that was the way the Church commits itself to living in the present and the future. The Church no longer seeks to rule the nations; it seeks to teach them. That teaching could, and did, have edge, when fundamental issues of the dignity of the human person were involved.

That was made unmistakably clear in the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, written to address the “life issues” of abortion and euthanasia that have been fiercely debated in democracies old and new for more than a decade. In that respect, *Evangelium Vitae* can also be read as the third panel in a triptych of encyclicals on the moral foundations of the free and virtuous society. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul celebrated the triumph of the democratic ideal in “1989” and endorsed a law-governed market economy while raising a caution flag about the impossibility of democracies being “value-neutral.” In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul linked the recognition of universally binding moral norms to democratic equality, the management of wealth, integrity in government, and self-interest and the common good. *Evangelium Vitae* raised the philosophical stakes by arguing that democracies risked self-destruction if objectively moral

wrongs were installed as constitutional “rights.”

In some of the sharpest language of the pontificate, John Paul wrote that democracies which deny the inalienable right to life from conception until natural death are “tyrant states.” They poison the “culture of rights” and betray the “long historical process . . . that once led to discovering the idea of ‘human rights’.”³⁰ A long-time critic of utilitarianism, John Paul was now trying to alert both new and old democracies to the dangers done to freedom’s cause by reducing human beings to useful—or useless—objects.³¹

John Paul also raised the stakes practically for Catholics living in democracies by teaching that “abortion and euthanasia are crimes which no human law can claim to legitimise. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead, there is *a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.*”³² The Pope did not recommend specific forms of non-violent resistance. Nonetheless, this was an unprecedented papal challenge to laws that had been passed, or constitutional decisions that had been rendered, by the established processes of democratic governments. John Paul also insisted that no one could legitimately campaign for “pro-choice” abortion and euthanasia laws, and that no legislator could licitly vote for such statutes.³³ Again, the methods of dealing with those who challenged this proscription were not specified. But after *Evangelium Vitae*, such legislators could no longer claim that their actions satisfied basic Catholic understandings of public justice.³⁴

During the 1990s, John Paul’s discussion of the problems and prospects of contemporary democracy was not always cast in critical terms. As he put it in a homily in Baltimore, Maryland, on 8 October 1995, “Christian witness takes different forms at different moments in the life of a nation. Sometimes, witnessing to Christ will mean drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest aspirations. At other times, witnessing to Christ means challenging that culture, especially when the *truth about the human person is concerned.*” The Pope then appealed to one of the giant figures of American history to make the point he had been developing for years about the imperative of building democratic polities on secure moral foundations; the reference points were American, but the challenge was universal:

One hundred thirty years ago, President Abraham Lincoln asked whether a nation ‘conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal’ could ‘long endure.’ President Lincoln’s question is no less a question for the present generation of Americans. Democracy cannot be sustained *without a shared commitment to certain moral truths about the human person and human community.* The basic question before a democratic society is, ‘How ought we to live together?’ In seeking an answer to this question, can society exclude moral truth and moral reasoning? Can the Biblical wisdom which played such a formative part in the very founding of your country be excluded from that debate? Would not doing so mean that tens of million of Americans could no longer offer the contribution of their deepest convictions to the formation of public policy? Surely it is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be

passed on to each new generation. Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.³⁵

III.

From Pope Gregory XVI to Pope Pius XII, the Bishops of Rome analyzed and criticized the modern democratic project from an “outsider” position. Even as the papal attitude toward democracy evolved from hostility (Gregory XVI and Pius IX) to toleration (Leo XIII and Pius XI) to modest admiration (Pius XII), the Church did not propose democracy as a form of government implied by Catholic social doctrine; democracy was a reality “outside” the Church, a reality that had often been erected against the Church. Some would argue that John Paul II, by his sharp critique of real existing democracy in the 1990s, has repositioned Catholicism as an “outsider” to the democratic project. This view is profoundly mistaken.

The Second Vatican Council and John Paul II have praised democracy as that form of government most likely to give effect to the core principles of Catholic social ethics: personalism (the human rights principle), the common good, subsidiarity (the free associational principle or principle of civil society), and solidarity (the relational principle or principle of civic friendship)³⁶. This endorsement involved a genuine development of social doctrine, not simply an accommodation to the facts of contemporary political life. Thus John Paul II’s critique of real existing democracy is an *internal* line of critique. It is a critique from a Church that has made a significant investment, for its own proper theological reasons, in the working-out of the democratic project in history. The Church is not subordinating itself to the democratic project. But the Church sees in the future of democracy a crucial public test of its own evangelical commitment to defend the inalienable dignity and value of every human life.

When democracies lose their constituting philosophical and legal principles—when wrongs are described as “rights” and the tools of law are deployed to do and to justify evil—democracies inevitably begin to behave, John Paul is suggesting, like totalitarians. Consciences are bound by force. “Rights” are used as pretexts for dissolving constitutionalism and establishing shadow governments (as, for example, when courts usurp the prerogatives of legislatures, or when regulatory agencies make life-and-death decisions, or when legal and medical professional associations or firms stymie the careers of the young by requiring them to acknowledge the existence of spurious “rights” in order to pursue their vocations). In all of this—and all of this is going on, today—the rule of law is being undermined, the bonds of civic friendship are being strained, fundamental norms of justice are being violated, and the inner architecture of democracy is being dismantled.

To point this out is not to demean the democratic project but to take the first step in its rescue, which is an accurate diagnosis of the current situation. At that diagnostic level, John Paul II’s moral endorsement and moral critique of the democratic project have brought us to a certain irony: crossing the threshold of the twenty-first century, the institution once regarded as democracy’s ancient and implacable foe, the Roman Catholic Church, is the most prominent voice calling democracies back to their

constituting principles and truth claims. For within the *critique* of John Paul II is embedded a *defence* of the democratic project as that was understood by Burke, Madison, Tocqueville and Acton.

All of which suggests that the future of the Church's engagement with the democratic project is going to be complex.

In the Third World, John Paul II's democratic universalism—the suggestion that democracy is a “universalizable” form of political organization—will be challenged by autocrats (primarily Chinese and Islamic) who argue that democracy, like the idea of “human rights”, is a form of Western cultural imperialism. The Pope's answer to the claim that there are no universal human rights was forcefully given at the United Nations in October 1995. There, John Paul vigorously defended the concept of a universal human nature in which both universal rights and moral duties could be discerned, while acknowledging a legitimate plurality of the “forms of freedom” by which those rights were secured and lived.³⁷

A more compelling critique of papal democratic universalism and the role of democracy in Third World development comes from scholars who point out that, while successful economic development does create pressures for democratisation, democracy itself does not seem necessary for successful economic development, at least at the beginning of an underdeveloped country's emergence into the modern world economy.³⁸

Thus the Church's public task in Third World settings and in the new democracies will be diverse—which would be congruent with John Paul's defence of a plurality of “forms of freedom.” In Latin America and central and eastern Europe, the Church and its people will have to defend and strengthen nascent institutions of democratic self-governance while continuing to build the foundations of civil society on which democracy rests. In other places (notably sub-Saharan Africa), it would be a great step forward if Catholicism could help advance civil society, market economies, the rule of law, and the prospects of entrepreneurship, even if these developments take place under less-than-democratic circumstances.

In the developed democracies, the threats to the democratic future are political, philosophical, and technological. On all three fronts, Catholicism will likely find itself in a counter-cultural position, forging a religiously-grounded moral-philosophical critique of contemporary political culture.

The political threats include the increasing hegemony of unelected judges in settling basic issues of public policy, which involves an attenuation of democratic process and a weakening of the people's democratic instincts. This malady is most advanced in North America, and while the Catholic Church in the United States and Canada has publicly responded to the effects of the judicial usurpation of politics on the life issues of abortion and euthanasia and on the definition of “marriage”, it cannot be said that the basic democratic question—*are we now ruled by unelected lawyers?*—has been forcefully engaged by Catholic leaders.

A further question for the Catholic engagement with developed democracies is raised by John Paul's teaching, in *Evangelium Vitae*, that statutory laws or constitutional interpretations of “rights” which violate the basic moral law are, in truth, no law, and must be consciously resisted. It may be assumed that the Pope

was not calling the Catholic population of the established democracies to violent insurrection. Still, very serious questions remain: if a structure of morally-repugnant “non-law” becomes so deeply imbedded in a democracy that its reversal by normal democratic means seems impossible, has that democracy lost its moral legitimacy? What ought to be the stance of Catholics toward such a democracy? These are large questions indeed, but it is not impossible—indeed, it is quite likely—that they will have to be faced in the next generation or two.³⁹

The philosophical threat to developed democracies is the prevalence, among both elites and the general public, of a soft utilitarianism married to a concept of freedom as radical personal autonomy. In John Paul II’s triptych of *Centesimus Annus*, *Veritatis Splendor*, and *Evangelium Vitae*, Catholics have powerful intellectual tools for proposing “freedom for excellence” over the “freedom of indifference” of the utilitarians and the sceptical relativists, particularly when responding to the myriad of issues proposed by the sexual revolution. Whether the Church’s teaching authorities in the developed democracies have grasped these tools and are deploying them imaginatively is another question.

The technological threat is posed primarily by the new biotechnologies and their linkage to the almost unimaginable power of super-computers. When Great Britain establishes a governmental agency called the Human Fertilisation and Embryological Authority, then the question is not whether the brave new world is on the horizon but whether its advance can be reversed. Here, in the world of designer babies, cloned human beings, a reprogrammed genome, and “spiritual machines” capable of creating an alternative “virtual reality” is John Paul II’s “culture of death” at its most imposing. And the questions this raises for democracy are profound. For these are truly ideas with consequences, including political consequences. As legal scholar Phillip Johnson has written, “In real life . . . the dark side of the technological utopia is that it implies a huge difference in power between the few who do the programming and the many who are programmed.”⁴⁰ And in a society defined by that gap, democracy is gravely imperilled, if not impossible.

The Catholic Church’s capacity to help meet this challenge to the democratic future, in consort with ecumenical, inter-religious, and philosophical allies, is not certain. On the one hand, and to cite the best test-case in the American context, the Church and its allies have kept the abortion issue alive when virtually every other centre of culture-formation has declared the issue resolved, in favour of abortion-on-demand as an expression of a woman’s autonomy rights; on the other hand, the laws in favour of a free-standing abortion license remain in force, and the Church and its allies have been unsuccessful, in the main, in educating both the public and the politicians about the *public* implications of an alleged “privacy right” to commit lethal violence. On the other hand, the Church and its allies have been successful in making the public case against state-sanctioned euthanasia; on the other hand, it must be admitted that the most effective arguments on this front have been pragmatic, appealing to the elderly’s disinclination to have insurance companies and medical bureaucrats decide whether it is time for them to become less “burdensome”. The stakes, for democracy, are enormous in these debates and in others that the new biotechnologies are generating. It is not an accident that the fictional brave new world (in Aldous Huxley,

C.S. Lewis, and others) is invariably an authoritarian world.

Finally, the Church in the early twenty-first century must confront the fact that these and related threats to the inner architecture of democracy are being mounted on the international plane. No institution in the world has been more supportive of post-World War II international organisations, including the United Nations and its affiliated agencies, than the Catholic Church. Yet it is precisely in these institutions that the culture of death is being vigorously promoted by activists who seek a way around what they perceive as the recalcitrance of unenlightened national governments, democratic or otherwise.

The effort to define a universal human right to abortion-on-demand at the Cairo World Conference on Population and Development in 1994 was the example *par excellence* of this phenomenon. An international campaign of resistance led by John Paul II blocked the efforts of the Clinton Administration and its European allies at Cairo.⁴¹ But the issue has come up time and again in U.N. fora since Cairo, and will certainly not be going away in the future. The question of how this and other campaigns may reshape the Holy See's view of the U.N. system is not within the scope of this lecture. But the fact that an institution to which the Holy See continues to pay considerable deference is a primary culprit in the deterioration of the idea of "human rights", and not infrequently finds itself tempted to override the democratic will of the people of sovereign states in the name of misconstrued "human rights", must give pause to those in the Holy See who care about the democratic project in the twenty-first century and the Church's relationship to it.

Some forty years ago, Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., one of the architects of Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom and an insightful analyst of the historical roots of the democratic project in history, warned about the erosion of the moral-intellectual foundations of democracy that he saw in American elite culture:

Perhaps one day the noble many-storied mansion of democracy will be dismantled, levelled to the dimensions of a flat majoritarianism, which is no mansion but a barn, perhaps even a tool shed in which the weapons of tyranny may be forged. Perhaps there will one day be widespread dissent even from the political principles which emerge from natural law, as well as dissent from the constellation of ideas that have historically undergirded those principles—the idea that government has a moral basis; that the universal moral law is the foundation of society; that the legal order of society—that is, the state—is subject to judgment by a law that is not statistical but inherent in the nature of man; that the eternal reason of God is the ultimate origin of all law; that this nation, in all its aspects—as a society, a state, an ordered and free relationship between governors and governed—is under God. The possibility that widespread dissent from these principles should develop is not foreclosed.⁴²

Not foreclosed? Not indeed. For the hard fact is that what Murray termed "the dissolution" is

already upon us, despite the seeming triumph of the democratic ideal in the aftermath of the Cold War. That triumph will be short-lived if the moral-intellectual foundations of the democratic project—what the bishops of the United States recently described as the “house of freedom”—are not restored. Thus in a paradox that would have seemed almost unimaginable a century ago, the question today, in the matter of Catholicism and democracy, is not whether the Church can “accept” democracy. The question is whether a democratic project that does not take seriously, and then act upon, Pope John Paul II’s critique of its current intellectual and moral condition, and his defence of classic democratic notions of the relationship between freedom and moral truth, can long endure.

ENDNOTES

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1. The French Directory declared Pius VI “the last Pope” and the local “Constitutional” clergy refused him a Christian burial. See Owen Chadwick, *The Popes and European Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 482; Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 203.
 2. See John F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999).
 3. Russell Hittinger, “What the 20th Century Papacy Tells Us About the Papacy of the Future”, unpublished lecture.
 4. Robert A. Graham, S.J., *Vatican Diplomacy: A Study of Church and State on the International Plane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 301-302.
 5. See Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
 6. It should be conceded that the Roman authorities were slow to seize the opportunities presented by what is sometimes called the “Catholic Whig tradition”, whose foremost exponent in the late 19th century was the English historian, Lord Acton. Finding its inspiration in the political thought of Thomas Aquinas, this stream of thought taught the possibility of genuine progress in history (which Acton understood to be the story of the human quest for liberty) when that progress is mediated through rightly-ordered public institutions holding themselves accountable to transcendent moral norms. This Catholic Whig tradition stood in sharp contrast to the Jacobinism with which Rome typically associated “liberalism”; but Acton’s negative views on the definition of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) made him an unlikely broker of what seemed, to many in the Vatican, an adventurous form of Catholic political thought. As things worked out, however, this Catholic Whig tradition would not have all that long to wait, as history goes, for its moment to

arrive.

7. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), pp. 287-301.

8. Leo XIII, *Longinqua Oceani*, in John Tracy Ellis, ed., *Documents of American Catholic History*, volume two (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazer, 1987), p. 502.

9. *Quadragesimo Anno* was issued to mark the fortieth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical which was the Magna Carta of modern Catholic social doctrine.

10. Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). Living in wartime exile in the United States, Maritain had this to say about the world-historical situation in 1942: "We are looking at the liquidation of what is known as the 'modern world' which ceased to be modern a quarter of a century ago when the First World War marked its entry into the past. The question is: in what will this liquidation result? . . . The tremendous historical fund of energy and truth accumulated for centuries is still available to human freedom, the forces of renewal are on the alert, and it is still up to us to make sure that this catastrophe of the modern world is not a regression to a perverted aping of the *ancien regime* or of the Middle Ages and that it does not wind up in the totalitarian putrefaction of the German New Order. It is up to us rather to see that it emerges in a new and truly creative age, where man, in suffering and hope, will resume his journey toward the conquest of freedom." (Ibid., pp. 11, 17)

11. For a more complete discussion of the role of the Declaration on Religious Freedom in shaping Catholic thought on democracy, see my *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 99-124. The Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) also played a significant role in shaping contemporary Catholic thinking on democracy. But it was *Dignitatis Humanae* which, by resolving the theoretical issue and clarifying a crucial reference point for Catholic political theory, gave a solid foundation to the more practical discussion of *Gaudium et Spes*.

12. On the medieval, rather than Enlightenment, roots of Catholic political theory, see John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1964).

13. Yet another document of Vatican II, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*), ratified this transition by teaching that the appointment of bishops—a particularly neuralgic issue in European Church-state relations for centuries—was outside the competence of states: "Since the apostolic office of bishops was instituted by Christ the Lord and is directed toward a spiritual and supernatural end, this sacred Ecumenical Council asserts that the competent ecclesiastical authority has the proper, special, and, as of right, exclusive power to

appoint and install bishops. Therefore, in order to safeguard the liberty of the Church, and better and more effectively to promote the good of the faithful, it is the desire of the sacred Council that for the future no rights or privileges be conceded to the civil authorities in regard to the election, nomination or presentation to bishoprics. [*Christus Dominus*, 20]. The revised Code of Canon Law (1983) confirmed this: “No rights and privileges of election, appointment, presentation or designation of bishops are hereafter granted to civil authorities.” [Canon 377.5]

14. See, among many other examples, Tad Szulc, *Pope John Paul II: The Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1995) and Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

15. See my *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), chapter four.

16. Roberto Suro, “Pope, on Latin Trip, Attacks Pinochet Regime”, *New York Times*, April 1, 1987, pp. A1, A10.

17. On this point, see my essay, “John Paul II and the Priority of Culture”, *First Things* 80 (February 1998), pp. 19-25.

18. For an analysis of the Puebla address, see *Witness to Hope*, pp. 284ff.

19. This critique was spelled out further in two instructions on liberation theology issued under John Paul’s authority by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1984 and 1986. The 1984 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’* further advanced the Catholic Church’s understanding of rightly-ordered politics by warning against a “politicization of existence” that “begins to sacralise politics . . . in favor of the projects of the revolution.” [#17] Such a revolutionary monism would quite obviously be incompatible with genuine democracy, which assumes a plurality of social and political institutions. The 1986 *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* moved the official Catholic discussion of the democratic possibility even farther, suggesting the moral superiority of pluralistic, law-governed democratic regimes in these terms: “There can only be authentic development in a social and political system which respects freedoms and fosters them through the participation of everyone. This participation can take different forms; it is necessary in order to guarantee a proper pluralism in institutions and in social initiatives . . . No one can be excluded from this participation in social and political life for reasons of sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion.” [#95] Participatory politics, in other words, are morally superior to the politics of vanguards, be they aristocratic or Marxist-Leninist.

20. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 44.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Ibid.

23. Cited in *Origins* 17:15 (September 25, 1987).

24. See *Witness to Hope*, pp. 300-325 and 543-548, for an analysis of the themes and impact of these two crucial papal pilgrimages.

25. *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

26. On this point, see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

27. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century* (New York: Scribners, 1993).

28. *Redemptoris Missio*, 39.

29. See Luigi Accatoli, *Quando il Papa Chiede Perdono: Tutti i Mea Culpa di Giovanni Paolo II*: (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).

30. *Evangelium Vitae*, 20, 18.

31. See Wojtyła's 1956-57 graduate lectures at the Catholic University of Lublin, which involved a searching critique of Jeremy Bentham's ethics, in Karol Wojtyła, *Wykłady lubelskie* (Lublin: Catholic University of Lublin Press, 1986).

32. Ibid., 73 [emphases in original].

33. Ibid.

34. *Evangelium Vitae* added yet another dimension to the Catholic appraisal of democracy—at least insofar as the United States was concerned—by its teaching on capital punishment, in which the Pope argued that there were virtually no instances in which the principle of social self-defense as a justification for the death penalty (the one criterion admitted by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [cf. *Catechism*, 2267; *Evangelium Vitae*, 56]) applied in the developed world. This teaching led, *inter alia*, to a comprehensive rejection of the death penalty by the Catholic bishops of the United States, although some scholars questioned whether John Paul's teaching on capital punishment could be regarded as a genuine development of doctrine. [See Steven A. Long, 'Evangelium Vitae, St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Death Penalty', *The Thomist* 63:4 (October 1999), pp. 511-552.]

35. John Paul II, *Homily at Camden Yards*, in *L'Osservatore Romano* [English Weekly Edition], October 11, 1995, pp. 11, 13. [emphases in original]

36. On the principle of solidarity, see *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38-40, and *Centesimus Annus*, 10, 41. Karol Wojtyła had been working through the concept of solidarity since the mid-1960s, when it became one of the centerpieces of his most extended philosophical work, *Person and Act*. On this point, see *Witness to Hope*, pp. 175-176.

37. After praising the “extraordinary global acceleration of that quest for freedom which is one of the great dynamics of human history”, John Paul had his to say about the charge of “cultural imperialism:”

“It is important for us to grasp what might be called *the inner structure* of this worldwide movement. It is precisely its global character which offers us its first and fundamental ‘key’ and confirms that there are indeed universal human rights, rooted in the nature of the person, rights which reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a *universal moral law*. These are not abstract points; rather, these rights tell us something important about the actual life of every individual and of every social group. *They also remind us that we do not live in an irrational or meaningless world*. On the contrary, there is a *moral logic which is built into human life* and which makes possible dialogue between individuals and peoples. If we want a *century of violent coercion* to be succeeded by a *century of persuasion*, we must find a way to discuss the human future intelligibly. The universal moral law written on the human heart is precisely that kin of ‘grammar’ which is needed if the world is to engage this discussion of its future.

“In this sense, it is a matter for serious concern that some people today deny the universality of human rights, just as they deny that there is a human nature shared by everyone. To be sure, there is no single model for organizing the politics and economics of human freedom; different cultures and different historical experiences give rise to different institutional forms of public life in a free and responsible society. But it is one thing to affirm a legitimate plurality of ‘forms of freedom’, and another to deny any universality or intelligibility to the nature of man or to the human experience. The latter makes the international politics of persuasion extremely difficult, if not impossible.” [John Paul II, *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, 3 (emphasis in original)]

38. See Peter L. Berger, *The Capitalist Revolution: Fifty Propositions on Prosperity, Equality, and Liberty* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). James Q. Wilson identifies what he believes to be the cultural pre-requisites for successful democracies, and the relative paucity of those pre-requisites in the contemporary world, in “Democracy for All?” *Commentary* 109: 3, March 2000, pp. 25-28.

39. See *The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics*, Mitchell S. Muncy, ed. (Dallas: Spence Publishing Co., 1997), and *The End of Democracy? II: A Crisis of Legitimacy*, Mitchell S. Muncy, ed. (Dallas: Spence Publishing Co. 1999).

40. See *First Things* 101 (March 2000), p. 49.

41. See *Witness to Hope*, pp. 715-727.

42. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 53.