

Civics

It should be obvious that the study of civics reflects one's concept of the nature of man, but the issue has been muddied in the most extraordinary manner. Christian civic culture must uphold the dignity of man, of each man since each one is a child of God our Father. And it should be ordered to the common good. What could be more obvious?

TRANQUILLITAS ORDINIS

This Latin term refers to the ordering of society for the true peace and security of its members. It is the goal of Christian civics that each member of society be able to develop his gifts and use them for the knowledge and worship of God and for the service of those around him.

The doctrine of the Incarnation, that the Son of God lived on earth as true God and true man implies that the divine life – and therefore any degree of personal holiness – can be lived on earth. This truth impels believers to seek true goodness in all they do. In the civitas, the community of mankind beyond the family or nomadic tribe, relationships among men must be regulated in complex ways, called government. Christian civic theory developed the idea that government must protect inalienable rights, rights that are from God: specifically the gift of life, the gift of true interior liberty, and the right to pursue true happiness, which is God's will for us in the world. Note: in its origin, the concept of the pursuit of happiness specifically disallowed the pursuit of license or of anything contrary to God's law and man's true happiness.

For all the years in which Christian culture was the foundation of civic thought, it was understood that laws must be made to maximize the opportunity to enjoy these inalienable rights, and any law which came to be understood as contrary to God's law was immediately null and void. Until the end of the nineteenth century, any law that could be shown to be unjust was thereby shown not to be law. It didn't need to be repealed to lose its force; it was immediately out of force.

Lincoln said it well, when he emphasized

the value of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people”. Christian government demands the same observation of law from all the people; it is conducted with the participation of all the people inasmuch as all are equally indwelt by the Spirit of God; and it works in the service of all the people who are equally the children of one Heavenly Father.

LEGAL POSITIVISM

Legal positivism is the name of the radical reconstruction of the philosophy of law which took over the legal profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, totally reversing the Christian philosophy of law. According to this view, the law is simply what the words say. That is what we have before us, and all else is mere speculation. It is a consequence of radical philosophical concepts of uncertainty that this refuge was taken – we cannot know meanings or history; all we have is the words, and they are the law.

Once again, we are faced with the effect of denying the possibility of knowing truth and being forced to base our lives on something smaller. If we cannot know God, if the Church cannot teach us the truth, if scripture can be endlessly reinterpreted so that it does not effectively teach, if there is no human certainty, then our laws cannot be ordered to the “good.” They are just words, temporary agreements between fallible human beings, and their only reasonable goal is order; therefore they must be limited to the meaning of the words, not the “truthful” or “good” intent of the authors. Justice is not a meaningful concept when philosophy is not based on truth.

This change in the basic philosophy of law is the reason for the constitutional changes of our century; laws can change if the meanings or understandings of the words change, even to mean the opposite of the original intent. This is not a problem that can be solved by a constitutional convention; it will require a philosophical reawakening, and, undergirding that, a religious conversion because it will require confidence in the search for truth.

PROPERTY CIVICS: GOVERNMENT BY THE RICH

Many people hold that the only true functions of government are to restrain the greed of men for each other's private property and to restrain the petty aggressions of men by having the largest army and the biggest guns. Everything else, it is said, should be left to the individual because any further functions may cause the government to become powerful and interfering. Indeed, even some Christians go so far as to invoke the doctrine of original sin as the reason why the personal call to goodness or holiness cannot be reflected in the outward expressions of national life. National life, they say, is "the law" which can only restrain sin; it cannot serve the individual in pursuit of good, and it should not try, since Jesus alone promotes holiness.

What a twisted combination of despair and confusion!

A true and comprehensive understanding of the Incarnation is precisely our bulwark against such despair about God's ability to work within the world. It is a kind of denial of the Incarnation to suppose that original sin renders a human institution incapable of being used in God's service. More dangerously, the effect of leaving the government weak is that then actual civic power remains with the wealthy. The Christian civic order strives to put power into the hands of men chosen for goodness, not for wealth.

For pagans, of course, national life can never be concerned with holiness, which, if they mentioned it at all, they assert to have different definitions according to various men. Either way, pagan or misguided Christian, civic responsibilities that should arise from the demands of justice and goodness during this human life are rejected; they are not perceived as possible governmental functions. This is a definite rejection of the concept that the indwelling Holy Spirit can guide the body of the Christian people.

If, however, the principal function of government is to protect private property, then the rich are the ones whom government is intended to serve, since they are the ones with the property. Such community-enhancing projects as flood control, far too

expensive for any individual and yet of great benefit to the poor and to the stability of the broader economy, can only be accomplished by a government mandated to seek the common good as such.

Worse, if the government makes peace merely by having the largest guns, that can only be "peace as the world gives it" — the peace of the rich lavishly protecting their riches. Christian civic peace is the peace of a right ordering in which the government uses its power and the national resources to develop the primary national resource — educated persons — and then all the secondary resources — roads, bridges, dams, and centers of learning. The use of these secondary resources frees the average person from dull and dehumanizing toil, leaving more time for prayer, reflection, study, invention, personal service, and social relationships.

It is essential that students know both concepts of government and understand what arguments will be used against the possibility of Christian civic order. There can be little progress in Christian culture without civic peace. Culture requires personal solitude, personal freedom, leisure, books, and learned association, that is, colleges and universities, rightly conceived. All these things depend upon civic peace.

ECONOMICS

Civics education must include economics because the way money moves is also the way power moves and the stability of any government depends on its relationship with other concentrations of power. It is therefore important to reflect on the kind of economic system that will support a civic theory. Unbridled capitalism can lead to such a concentration of power as to undermine any other system. Socialism involves such a profound subordination of the individual to the state that it always involved a denial of the dignity and freedom of the person.

But capitalism and socialism are not the only options!

The American System of political economy, systematically laid out by Friedrich List was an option that put the state in charge of protecting national

economic interests, the public good, without taking over every aspect of personal economic life as socialism does.

Economic theories under the general category of *Distributism* reflect the faith that economic life can be moral, and the claim that neither the markets (capitalism) nor any central governmental power (socialism) should be allowed to govern the entire financial life of a civic entity. Either is bound to become despotic.

Members of the religious association called Focolare have coined the phrase "economics of communion" to describe their commitment to an economy of mutual service rather than unrestrained and destructive competition. Their work is has a beautiful witness to hope.