

POLITICAL THEOLOGY FROM ST. THOMAS AQUINAS TO JOHN PAUL II AND BENEDICT XVI

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The notion of political theology effectively emerged in the twentieth century in a rather special context, that of the “rise of totalitarianism” and the controversy between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson. In his *Political Theology* (1922), Carl Schmitt transposes theological and political concepts: “the dominant concepts of modern theory are secularized theological concepts.”¹ At the same time, in France, Charles Maurras follows a similar thought process, justifying the monarchic principle according to theological ideas. These “political theologies” of the interwar period, which are better described as political philosophies which invoke principles taken from Christianity, can to some extent be considered Christian ideologies when they treat Christianity as the religious substratum of the political organization, even if they are sometimes radically opposed to it. As Schmitt says, these political theologies are in fact the product of a secularization of theological notions emerging from Christianity, which then become instruments in service of something completely different.

Erik Peterson, a laic theologian who moved from Protestantism to Catholicism in 1930, published several works during the 1930s, without directly critiquing Schmitt. In the guise of being historical studies, they target Nazism and the number of Christians colluding with the regime. All these works address political theology.² In *Monotheism, a Political Problem*,³ Peterson alludes to—and criticizes—the political

¹ Carl Schmitt, *Théologie Politique I, Quatre Chapitres sur la Théorie de la Souveraineté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). Carl Schmitt would come back to the question much later, in 1969, with his *Théologie Politique II* [Political Theology II], which has been published in French in the same volume.

² In *Monotheism: A Political Problem* (1935), Peterson first refers to Eusebius of Caesarea who saw in the Roman Empire a providential preparation for the advent of Christianity, and a connection between the affirmation of monotheism with the establishment of a regime with a single sovereign. From this perspective, the *Pax Augusta*, during which the Savior was born, was the realization of prophetic oracles. Erik Peterson refutes this idea, in the name of the Trinitarian dogma which characterizes Christian monotheism, and in the name of the inherent eschatological character of Christian dogma. According to him, these aspects preclude any confusion or association between the belief in a single God and that of a single political power. See E. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 2011). The essay under discussion here, entitled “Monotheism as a Political Problem”, is contained in this volume.

³ E. Peterson, *Le monothéisme : un problème politique et autres traités* (Paris: Bayard, 2007).

ideas of Carl Schmitt, that is, his political theology understood as a justification of a political order using theological arguments.⁴

In this obviously dated approach, political theology is understood as the justification of a given political order by theological means; it is therefore a very specific perspective which is not, at its heart, theological, but rather philosophical. Consequently, there is a great risk of removing politics from the profane order by making it a sacred object.⁵ This fits with the trend identified by Eric Voegelin who saw the rise of “political religions” in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century all sought, in one way or another, to confer a religious character—which they otherwise rejected—on the political order.

Contemporary political thought thus inherits the notion of political theology, but we will understand it differently here, that is, not in the sense of drawing political applications from Christian theological principles in order to shape a communal order, but as deriving from the idea in Christian theology of taking into account the community aspects of human life. This is a strict theological perspective. Since nothing that falls under the category of the created order is outside the field of theology, it is natural to consider the communal nature of man and the existence of human communities. For that matter, the communal character of God’s design itself justifies the elaboration of a theology *of* politics, that is, of the communal.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124 : “Le concept de ‘théologie politique’ a été introduit en littérature par les travaux de Carl Schmitt, *Théologie politique*, Munich, 1922. Ses considérations, à l’époque, n’ont pas été exposées de façon systématique. Nous avons tenté ici de démontrer à partir d’un exemple concret l’impossibilité d’une telle ‘théologie politique’ ” [English translation : “the concept of ‘political theology’ was introduced into the literature in the work of Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, Munich, 1922. His arguments were not at that time explored systematically, Here I have tried to demonstrate with a concrete example the impossibility of such a ‘political theology’ ”]. It is this note which justifies the subtitle Schmitt gave to his *Political Theology II*: “The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology.”

⁵ This is the criticism that Jacques Maritain makes of Carl Schmitt in 1936 in *Humanisme intégral*:

“M. Carl Schmitt, qui fut un des inspireurs et des conseillers intellectuels du régime nazi, avait cherché jadis à montrer dans les grandes idées politiques et juridiques modernes une transposition de thèmes essentiellement théologiques. De là, si l’on se place, pour spéculer, à un point de vue pratique et concret, sans tenir compte de la distinction des objets formels, on viendra très aisément à dire que les réalités politiques sont elles-mêmes de l’ordre divin et sacré. Tel est le sens que les théoriciens allemands contemporains du « Sacrum Imperium » donnent au mot *politische Theologie*. Ils se réfèrent ainsi à l’idée messianique et évangélique du Royaume de Dieu dont ils veulent trouver une réalisation dans le temps et dans l’histoire.” [English translation : “Carl Schmitt, who was an inspiration and intellectual counselor for the Nazi regime, sought at one time to show a recasting of essentially theological themes into the great modern political and juridical ideas. To speculate from there, if one were to take a practical and concrete approach without considering the distinction between formal objects, it would be very easy to say that political realities are themselves of the divine and sacred order. This is the meaning that the German theorists contemporary to the “Sacrum Imperium” give to the word *politische Theologie*. They refer to the messianic and evangelical idea of the Kingdom of God, which they hope to find realized in time and history”]. See Jacques Maritain, *Humanisme intégral*, O. C. 6, p. 406-407.

This is, in my view, the only legitimate meaning of the expression, even if certain contemporary authors have sought to orient it in a different direction.⁶

Therefore, if we understand “political theology” to mean a theology concerned with the communal order, with the fact that people are called to live in human communities, we must recognize that political theology has been slow to emerge in the Tradition of the Church. Certainly, the communal nature of human life and the reality of human communities have not escaped the judicious attention of the Fathers of the Church, but it took centuries for the political order to be caught up in the light of Revelation. It is true that the foundations in the New Testament are scarce. The essential place is the word of Christ brought by Saint Matthew: “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God, the things that are God's” (Matt. 22:21), to which we can add the words of Saint Paul when he invited prayers for political authorities. In fact, during the first millennium everything happens as though focused on the construction of a new body politic *sui generis*: the Church. Natural political communities are then only seen as the inevitable frame for this construction. It is evident in hindsight that primacy is given to Christian life in the heart of various political communities, and not to political thought in a Christian view.

Saint Augustin is very illuminating in this regard. He is undoubtedly the first to consider, in *City of God*, the meeting of a city of a divine nature—which one could view, in a simplified way, as the Church here on Earth—and Earthly cities. His treatise, and its title in particular, are, however, the source of a remarkable and long-lived misunderstanding: the idea that the *civitas terrena* which stands in opposition to the *civitas Dei* is not the political city, but the spiritual city through which man opposes the divine work. Of course, this is why he also calls it *the city of the Devil*. If we are not careful, we may take this to mean that many people spontaneously set up an opposition between the terrestrial city, understood as the political city, and the Church, understood as the city of God. This leads us into a dialectic of opposition which has nothing to do with Augustin's idea. For him, the fight between the two cities is spiritual, and that is what matters to him. This spiritual combat takes place within a political city, whatever its shape, but which is not defined in itself. Through a paradox which is undeniably underemphasized, Saint Augustin's *City of God* is characterized by the absence of political theology in the sense of theological thought about the political order. This absence is very significant, in a treatise which had the potential for such an approach.

⁶ The expression reappears in the current era in the German theology of the years 1960-1980, in particular that of Jean-Baptiste Metz and Jürgen Moltmann. For them, since they justifiably affirm that evangelical principles cannot be satisfied with shaping an individual ethics or being limited to ecclesiastical communities, it must translate into political action. Various theologies of liberation fit into this perspective. In fact, this political theology searches to foreground a Christian praxis in the political life of cities. More precisely, it is not strictly speaking a political theology but seeks to be a Christian doctrine of political activity.

It demonstrates theological thinking which is not yet ready to deal with the political object, and perhaps, to some extent, because it does not have the tools to do so. Effectively, the philosophical instrument to think about the political city itself is lacking in Saint Augustin's work, and this only serves to highlight the contrast with the contribution of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Before coming to the rise of political thought in the Middle Ages, with Thomas Aquinas, long centuries of Christianity pass where practical questions are dominant in the relationship between the Church and terrestrial cities. Here, we will take Christianity to mean a model of close cooperation between the powers, which depends on the argument that the civil authority, the prince, must cooperate in the construction of the Kingdom of God on Earth, which is in the care of the Pope. This context of Christianity, especially after the Gregorian reform in the twelfth century, encourages the establishment of a fairly common doctrine which was termed "political Augustinism" by Mgr. Arquillière. It relies on the fact that divine law has often been imposed on, or taken the place of, the natural law which should govern the temporal order. Divine law, or something calling itself divine law, takes on such an authority by virtue of its origin that it is impossible to see how a human law could not yield to it. To speak of political Augustinism is likely excessive, if we understand by this that the original source is the theology of Saint Augustin, but the term is justified if we consider certain Church practices as regards the temporal order. Beginning with Gregory VII, Popes were not content to excommunicate recalcitrant sovereigns, but rather aimed to depose them, which indicates a direct interference of ecclesiastical power in the temporal order. This all shows the absence of theological thought honoring the legitimacy of the temporal order, and only serves to highlight the contribution of Saint Thomas.

1. The Decisive Contribution of Thomas Aquinas

At a time when Christian human societies are in transformation, meaning the evolution of secular activities, and in a theological and spiritual context which has a tendency to subsume the natural order into the supernatural, Saint Thomas contributes, for the first time, political thought based on natural reason.⁷ It is not an exaggeration to say that, in this domain as in others, Thomas shows an extraordinary trust in natural reason, because it comes from God, that it is, as contemporary language would have it, the honored image of himself that God placed in man.

⁷ I have discussed this point more in detail in Francois, Daguet, *Du politique chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2017).

This sudden explosion in political thought in the thirteenth century has a practical, almost material cause: the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Politics*, translated into Latin by Guillaume de Moerbeke, which quickly spread into sites of theological study across Latin Europe. Saint Thomas's assimilation of and adherence to the main tenets of Aristotelian politics is clear throughout the composition of the second part of the *Summa Theologiae*, usually described as the section on morality. In Aristotelian politics, Saint Thomas has access to the philosophical instrument Augustin lacked, which allows him to think about the political order itself in the light of the Christian Revelation. In the view of the dominant thinking of his time, which bore the stamp of this "political Augustinism" which I discussed above, the emergence of a moral and political thought based in nature, but open to the workings of grace, upends the way of thinking about the community order. It is the natural level which is the first consideration, all while honoring the perfection necessarily afforded by grace: *gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*.

How then do we characterize Thomas Aquinas's approach to the theology of politics in a few words? We can identify two fundamental principles. The first principle is that the political order is finalized by a moral good, itself controlled by the divine good. Thomas shares Aristotle's firm ideas: communal life, understood on the natural level, is directed by a good of a moral nature which gives purpose to all city life, the life of all together and of each individually. Simply put, it is the search for happiness which drives the city; there is a political happiness, and it is even the result of singular happiness. Incidentally, this is why the political city is recognized to be, along with the family, a *natural* community, even the perfect natural community. That which Thomas calls, without defining it, the common good (*bonum commune*), which Aristotle simply called the good, without qualifying it, is for both men what we achieve in seeking to live, individually and together, a virtuous life. There are, of course, goods of the first order essential to communal life (peace, prosperity, wealth, culture): these allow us to *live*, according to Aristotle's terminology. Yet they are not sufficient to finalize the political order; they are themselves aimed at *living well*, that is, a life lived according to virtue and shared by the majority of the citizens. It is from this communal quest that friendship among citizens is born. There is therefore a happiness that comes from living together, and it is this which must be sought, constructed, and received all at once. It is important to note that this communal happiness is at once in the city and existing beyond it.

For Saint Thomas, as for Aristotle before him, the political order is therefore not a simple packaging of the private order dealt with by individual morality: it is rather the achievement of the whole moral structure. A very ancient tradition separated morality from politics, and often ignored the second. This is to deeply betray the ideas of the two great classic authors which I discuss: the study of individual morality is a prerequisite for studying the community order. Politics is the fulfilment of the practical order, of

human activity, and not simply its inevitable packaging. One has only to carefully read the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to grasp the ultimate nature of politics, which makes political science into an architectonic study par excellence, in the practical order.

Thomas Aquinas, far from relativizing such an idea, subscribed to it wholeheartedly: the political order is the final fulfilment of singular morality. Nevertheless, the Christian theologian adds an important aspect: this common good, this common happiness, which finalizes the city on the natural level, is not the ultimate good, which itself is given by the divine good, which is God himself—understood in an objective way—and the beatitude resulting from a vision of God—subjectively. The originality of Saint Thomas's thinking consists in his non-elimination of the temporal good, rather, by subsuming it into the supernatural good; he engages with the temporal good by placing it under the divine good. This is not a simple proposition made here, for theological charity, an expression of grace that effectively realizes here on Earth this raising up of the natural order. It does not disqualify it but rather corrects and elevates it from inside, as leavening does a dough. Thomas Aquinas reclaims space for political science, as we have noted, although he does it as a Christian theologian in such a way that nature cannot be considered without its connection to grace. It is the conjunction of these two which is at the heart of the divine and human work in the world, that is, the entire composition of the terrestrial city; this will not ever be more itself than when it opens itself up to the working of grace.

The second principle is that the Church and the city, on different levels, are empowered to cooperate. Political Augustinism stopped at the inclusion of the natural order within the supernatural one, and due both to this and a lack of conceptual means did not seek to consider the terrestrial city itself. Father Congar has showed how much the idea of *Ecclesia*, from the Gregorian reform onward, encompasses both the Church, as a hierarchically constituted society, and temporal sovereignties. Faced with this, as a theologian of Christianity, Thomas Aquinas uses Aristotelian instruments to produce a two-fold innovation. First, he thinks about the temporal city in and of itself, and secondly, he specifies more or less explicitly the relationship of the Church with it. He does not in any way place the Church and the terrestrial city on the same plane, but according to the conception taken up by the Vatican II, he sees the Church as a theological leavening agent within societies which are temporal by nature.

From this comes his idea of the relationship between the two powers, temporal and spiritual. Saint Thomas acknowledged the great autonomy of temporal power, as ecclesiastical authority does not intervene into the affairs of the city until it comes to the salvation of souls. In today's words, we would say that the Thomasian doctrine is a laic one which affirms the autonomy of temporal power in relation to the ecclesiastical sphere. It must be said that this free exercise of temporal power, on the basis of

natural law, benefits from the support of grace, which perfects the natural order by correcting it where it may have gone wrong. I propose to present Thomas's approach by describing his doctrine as Chalcedonian, to describe the union, which prevails between the natural and supernatural orders without confusion or separation. For a theologian of Christianity, a pure separation of the two orders was unthinkable, and would be so up until the French Revolution which ended the era of political Christianity.

The theology of politics of Thomas Aquinas reminds us that the natural order, left to its own devices, cannot achieve the purpose for which it was made without divine help, and that it would not be able to fulfil the vocation of the human communities which live, ultimately, subject to a supernatural good that they cannot produce for themselves. However, there is a corresponding focus on the fact that communal life is first and foremost life in a political city, not the life of the Church. The latter is the interior leavening agent for the former. For the first time in Christianity, Thomas Aquinas's theology allows us to "think about politics" itself, in its connection with the theological order. The masterful treatise on the law, in *Summa Theologiae*, illustrates his idea of the whole, which makes space for nature, in its entirety—especially in his doctrine of natural law—and for divine aid through divine law. We can see from this Thomas's reversal of Augustinian conceptions characterized by the primacy of the supernatural order, sometimes to the exclusion of all else.

2. The Posteriority of Thomasian Political Theology

It is difficult to appropriately judge the effect of the political writings of Thomas. The question is deserving of future study. On one hand, it is fairly clear that this incipient political theology is still an opinion, especially because, not being expressed in any larger work, it passes unnoticed by many. Augustinian ideas remain widespread during Thomas's time and after, encouraged by the practical affirmation of the papal prerogatives regarding temporal sovereigns. In terms of politics more than any other, historical reality is decisive and new ideas are slow to take shape. In the following centuries, Thomasian ideas are never formally taken up by the Church Magisterium which remains steadfastly distanced from political matters up until the collapse of Christianity beginning at the end of the eighteenth century.

On the other hand, despite all this, it seems today that Saint Thomas's work rekindled political science, strictly speaking, because it allows for consideration of the foundation of natural reason. The majority of the big driving questions of the following centuries, notably that of political systems, of the organization of the temporal city, and of the relationship between the temporal and ecclesiastic powers, have their

source in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. We tend to say that modern political thought emerges, on the cusp of the 16th century, in reaction to the excesses of the ecclesiastical influence on the civil order. It is however fairer to say that these debates did not appear for the first time in the modern era. They were already present in the thirteenth century and Thomas Aquinas's works, by authorizing the idea of a profane political thought, contributes decisive elements to this turn in European thought.⁸

Within the Church, one can see the influence of Thomasian ideas in the questions debated in the sixteenth century during the controversy of the Reformation. It is quite clear, for example, in Robert Bellarmine's repeated presentation of his doctrine of the ecclesiastical authority's "indirect power" over the city. This is a balanced doctrine presented after the recurrent interference of the medieval era and during a time when the wars of religion were beginning to devastate Latin Europe. Of course, the real reach of this spiritual power indirectly exercised *in temporalibus* is subject to multiple interpretations, but it is clear that the Jesuit doctor takes up Thomas's idea of it having no role except when the salvation of souls is immediately relevant. We can undoubtedly argue that the Thomasian conception of the relationship between the two cities progressively became, if not a dominant opinion, at least a common reference available to all.

In the same way and at the same time, it is clear that the development of the Salamancan school relies on the recognition of the legitimacy of the natural human and community order. Francisco de Vitoria contributed greatly to increased familiarity with the works of Thomas Aquinas, and from there the diffusion of his ideas across Europe, at a time when there was a huge expansion of human activity in economics, the new field of domestic and international law, as well as the juridical status of the person.

Certainly, it would be fair to speak of a general and diffuse fertility as regards the political theology of Thomas, rather than a formal and immediate posteriority. One could imagine that the collapse of the rule of Christianity in Europe from the end of the eighteenth century would definitively disqualify the ideas of Thomas of Aquinas, doctor of Christianity. Paradoxically, the reverse takes place. In effect, the French Revolution and its inauguration of the end of Christianity's rule crippled Catholic doctrine, both that of the pontifical Magisterium and that of theologians. Due to the continuing impoverishment of theology in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century, the Church discovered at the beginning of the nineteenth century that it had no useful conceptual instrument with which to think about the new situation. This situation is due to the fact that temporal societies then wished to be built on a profane foundation. The movement was long, but we can see that it reached its end at the end of the twentieth

⁸ See Francois Daguet, "Thomas d'Aquin et la renaissance de la science politique au XIII^e siècle," in *Le théologico-politique au Moyen-Age*, ed. D. Poirel (Paris: Vrin, 2020), 87–102.

century. It is only with the papacy of Leo XIII that the Church took note of the now irreversible change and abandoned its desire to return to the *statu quo ante*. It then had to rethink the idea of political communities without postulating their immediate submission to the supernatural order. Thomas's theology was then rediscovered, a theology which gives ample space to the natural order, a useful instrument to deal with politics in the new context of contemporary liberal societies.

3. The Renewal of Political Theology in the Twentieth Century

Even if the pontifical Magisterium borrowed frequently from the Thomasian writings beginning with Leo XIII, they were still far from the elaboration of a complete political doctrine. Thomasian thought was only appealed to here and there: in reference to the freedom of choice of political systems, the basis of the legislative structure about natural law, the necessary opening of political orders to transcendence, etc... In truth, few authors sought to think about the new political order as a whole and in the light of Revelation.

One of the only examples is Jacques Maritain, supported by his friend the abbot Charles Journet. Taking note of the end of what he calls "sacral Christianity", Maritain looks to conceive of a political order in keeping with the Revelation which would also oppose the "political religions"—of the nationalist-socialist or Marxist-socialist type—as well as it did bourgeois liberalism. One of the bases of the Maritainian conception of politics is still the idea of the ontological subordination of the two cities, which his friend Journet shares, and which justifies for them the natural jurisdiction of the Church over the city. The idea of two analogical realizations of Christianity—one sacral and the other profane—is seductive and coherent. However, with hindsight, it seems that this conception of a non-sacral Christianity depends on the assumption of human societies which remain Christian at their core, even if their institutions are not. This was still the case of the United States in the middle of the last century, where Maritain lived at the time he was he was thinking about the possibility of a new Christianity. It is difficult to say that this is true for any place in the world today, and the Maritainian political project, as seductive as it was, today appears to us to be inoperative.

The Second Vatican Council is an essential milestone in the Church's incorporation of political factors in its thinking. *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly discusses the political community, and asserts that "among those social ties which man needs for his development some, like the family and political community, relate

with greater immediacy to his innermost nature.”⁹. This echoes the Thomasian doctrine of natural political communities, the family and the city. Despite introducing the topic, the Vatican II doesn’t offer a Catholic political doctrine taken in its entirety. However, it does contribute several stones in the foundation for a future building. We can summarize the contribution of the Council by saying that it places the foundation of a Catholic conception of laicity. The term doesn’t appear in the Council’s text, but it would be expressly stated by John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger forty years later. This idea rests on the following two principles:

1) In the wake of its recognition of the legitimate “autonomy of earthly affairs,”¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, which concerns the Church in the modern world, clearly states the principle of autonomy of the two spheres, the political and the religious: “The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other (*in proprio campo ab invicem sunt independentes et autonomae*). Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men. The more that both foster sounder cooperation between themselves with due consideration for the circumstances of time and place, the more effective will their service be exercised for the good of all.”¹¹. However, this recognition of the political order’s autonomy does not stop the Church from passing judgement on the moral foundations upon which the political order is built: “It is only right, however, that at all times and in all places, the Church should have true freedom ... to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it. In this, she should make use of all the means—but only those—which accord with the Gospel and which correspond to the general good according to the diversity of times and circumstances”¹².

2) In turn, *Dignitatis Humanae* discusses what the political community’s stance towards the Church should be, in the eyes of the Catholics: the wish is for a guarantee of the right to religious freedom.

Thus on one hand, *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes the justified autonomy of the political order, without prejudice to the right to pass moral judgement on the *res publica*, and on the other, *Dignitatis Humanae* claims a guarantee of individual and group religious freedom from the political powers. On the part of the

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium Et Spes*, para. 25 (Vatican City, 7 December 1965). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para. 76.

¹² *Ibid.*

Church, there is an acknowledgement of an inability to directly understand temporal affairs; on the part of the State, a recognition of non-confessionality and an expectation of non-interference in spiritual matters and a guarantee of religious liberty. It is easy to see the far-reaching influence of Thomasian ideas. This reciprocal non-interference is indeed the expression of what current and legal language calls laicity. What the Council is advocating is thus a system of autonomy, or even separation, but not exclusively, since it calls for cooperation for the good of all. This can be seen as separation-distinction, which is not the same as separation-indifference or ignorance.

In this regard, the Second Vatican Council seems to be the one which takes into consideration the societal evolution of the past two centuries—in a word, the end of Christianity—and which seeks to present a fair ecclesiastical conception of the political community itself and of the relationship which the Church intends to have with it. Developed in practice, these are some essential elements for a theology of politics. However, many other elements, particularly as regards the basis of political communities are added during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

4. The Contribution of Saint John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI

While taking part in the Church’s integration of conciliar teaching, John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger must take into account a decisive political phenomenon: the general abandonment of Christian references in historically Christian liberal societies, and the explosion of moral references which the two Popes summarize in the expression “ethical relativism.” Institutional questions are no longer the object of the Church’s reflection, but also, and more radically, the ethical foundations of contemporary political societies. During the course of these two papacies, we can distinguish two large areas where theology was deepened in the political domain. A first area concerns the return to the traditional doctrine of natural law. The type of misunderstanding that this venerable doctrine, which owes a great deal to Saint Thomas, has been subjected to is well-known. This explains why it does not appear *expressis verbis* in the conciliar texts, even if its content is in fact present. During his political and moral Magisterium, John Paul II recenters it by making it one of the foundational aspects, not only of any singular moral edifice, but also of the laws of the city. The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) reaffirms the necessity of a morality which unites liberty and truth as mediated by natural law. It refers explicitly to the “Thomist doctrine” revived by Leo XIII.¹³ The repercussions in the political sphere are clear in his denunciation of “*the risk of an*

¹³ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, para. 44 (Vatican City, 6 August 1993). Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

alliance between democracy and ethical relativism, which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life, and on a deeper level make the acknowledgement of truth impossible.”¹⁴ At the same time, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) shows the return to a doctrine well established in the Tradition, by avowing that natural law, in addition to providing the basis of a personal morality, “provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices.”¹⁵ It also provides the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community. Finally, it provides the necessary basis for the civil law with which it is connected, whether by a reflection that draws conclusions from its principles, or by additions of a positive and juridical nature.”¹⁶ Here again we see the Thomasian affirmation according to which a positive law is not truly a law unless it is consistent with right reason and therefore the principles of natural law.¹⁷ Moreover, the *Catechism* again takes up the essential facts about the political order which follow both from Thomasian ideas and Tradition, on the basis of conciliar affirmations. People live in society by nature, primarily in families and the political community.¹⁸ We see the ethical aim of communal life highlighted, through the notion of *common good* which owes so much to Saint Thomas.¹⁹ Finally the necessary opening of the political order to spiritual realities is affirmed, along with the necessity of grace for a life in society which truly turns away from evil and violence.²⁰ A *Note* from the 2002 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, written by Joseph Ratzinger and approved publicly by John Paul II, is the result of these great principles for Catholic engagement in politics. Notably, it affirms that “for Catholic moral doctrine, the rightful autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church – *but not from that of morality* – is a value that has been attained and is recognized by the Catholic Church, and represents a form of cultural heritage.”²¹ The *Note* carefully distinguishes the legitimate pluralism of options for governance and the illegitimate pluralism of moral conceptions of personhood: “Political freedom is not – and cannot be – based upon the relativistic idea that all conceptions of the human person’s good have the same value and truth.”²² If we pay

¹⁴ Ibid., para. 101.

¹⁵ The full text of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, promulgated by John Paul II in 1992, is available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

¹⁶ Ibid., para. 1959. Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6U.HTM.

¹⁷ Ibid., para. 1902. Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6J.HTM.

¹⁸ Ibid., para. 1882. Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6G.HTM.

¹⁹ Ibid., para. 1905–1912. Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6K.HTM.

²⁰ Ibid., para. 1886–1889. Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6H.HTM.

²¹ See The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note: The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, para. 6 (Vatican City, 21 November 2002). Available online at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html. Here the English translation has been slightly revised.

²² Ibid., para. 3.

attention, the great principles of Saint Thomas's political theology have become those of the Church through the Magisterium of John Paul II and of Joseph Ratzinger.

The second area where theology was deepened in the political domain regards the call for a political order based on natural reason and open to the supernatural order. Joseph Ratzinger, having become Pope Benedict XVI, continues his reflection on the political order in his encyclicals, but also in his speeches given in the great liberal democracies (United States, Great Britain, and Germany). In an expansion of the conciliar teaching on the separation of the political and religious spheres, Benedict XVI justifies this separation by distinguishing the objects belonging to each. In *Deus Caritas Est*, he writes that it is for the State to establish and maintain a judicial order in the city, while the role of the Church is to live on charity.²³ He does not hesitate in stating that: "Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (see Matt 22:21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the autonomy of the temporal sphere." He goes on to wonder about the basis of the contemporary judicial order, that is the possibility of establishing a truly just political order. At the Bundestag, in 2011, he shows the impasse faced by contemporary juridical positivism: "Where positivist reason dominates the field to the exclusion of all else – and that is broadly the case in our public mindset – then the classical sources of knowledge for ethics and law are excluded." At Westminster, in 2010, he had already spoken on this subject, showing the only possible solution, the recognition of natural law:

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 - herein lies the real challenge for

²³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, para. 28 (Vatican City, 25 December 2005). Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html. In order to define more accurately the relationship between the necessary commitment to justice and the ministry of charity, two fundamental situations need to be considered: first, the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics. As Augustine once said, a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves: "*Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia?*" Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Matt 22:21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the autonomy of the temporal sphere. Second, justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics [...] The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.

democracy... The central question at issue, then, is this: where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found? The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation.

In other words, he refers to the doctrine of civil law supported by principles of natural law, which Saint Thomas brilliantly developed. Finally, as in 2002, Benedict XVI restates the necessary cooperation of the political and religious spheres. Indeed, no juridical order would be sufficient in and of itself. He calls for the necessity of transcendence through charity: “Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love” (*Deus Caritas Est*, para. 28). His contemplation is far-reaching, suggesting that each of the spheres, one of reason and one of faith, contribute to the perfection of the other by purifying the corruptions which affect or threaten it.²⁴

Clearly, the united papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI show a unique elaboration of a Catholic political doctrine, conveying a true political theology. In hindsight, we see that it is a communal work, which addresses the demands facing the Church in the face of the evolution of the contemporary era. Remarkably, this political theology, based on conciliar statements, essentially fulfils this need and does not hesitate to draw from nor refer to Thomasian sources for its broad principles.

The assessment presented in the present contribution, while not immune the criticisms applied to any broad overview, suggests a few conclusions. It must be recognized in no uncertain terms that the theological tradition of the Catholic Church has been lazy as relates to politics—and this is primarily due to the Thomist school. While the essential elements for the elaboration of a political theology were available in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the Church preferred to depend on the pragmatism of a Christian system which thought itself immune to a radical challenge. At a time when modern thought, from the seventeenth century on, aims to emancipate its politics from the Christian order, theology is incapable of responding with a proposal which correctly understands the human community order. Things take a dramatic turn with the collapse of Christianity, as the Church shows itself incapable, not only of

²⁴ “It is a two-way process. Without the corrective supplied by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person. Such misuse of reason, after all, was what gave rise to the slave trade in the first place and to many other social evils, not least the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.” Pope Benedict XVI’s address to the Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall on 17 September 2010 is available online at: http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile.html.

responding to events but even of understanding them: it does not have access to the keys of intelligibility which, paradoxically, its own tradition had provided. The extent of these consequences reveals itself over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, theology remains deaf to the transformational political processes of the human world taking place in communal life, with a few exceptions such as that of Jacques Maritain discussed above. It is the pontifical leadership which, bit by bit, develops a Christian response to the political challenges of the modern world. The Second Vatican Council is marked by this weakness. If, on one hand, it places a few stones in the foundation subsequently taken up by the Magisterium of the Popes following Leo XIII, it gives only a general idea of the political order.

Also, in this context the work developed jointly by John Paul II and Benedict XVI appears remarkable. It is the first sketch of a true theology of politics, the work of two minds particularly aware of the *res publica*. However, this work remains largely unknown for at least two reasons. On one hand, it is dispersed in multiple texts, which means that the whole is not visible to the eyes of the faithful. On the other hand, it is an incomplete work, in the sense that it is constructed through successive elements, not without a certain perfectly legitimate pragmatism as regards political matters. It has not been the object of a summary or of a major text such as an encyclical, which appears to have damaged both its chances of being generally known and its authority. Finally, the two preceding considerations lead to a hope that theologians will—finally—take up this issue, shaking off the lethargy that has affected them for the preceding centuries. The stakes are no less important—at issue is the credibility of a speech which the Church addresses to a world being constructed largely without it. At best, the neglect of political matters limits Christian discourse to evangelical pronouncements, which, while of course necessary, are inadmissible to those without faith. It is sometimes limited to simply providing a theological response to immediate political questions, as we see in the *Radical Orthodoxy* movement. This is, in fact, yielding to the temptation of a political Augustinism, practical rather than conceptual, but as insufficient today as it was in the past to respond to contemporary political questions. It is past time to rediscover political Thomism.