

Catholicism and Democracy in America¹

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I

JESUS PROMISES his followers that they will be hated in this world. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18–19).

This is not an isolated thought, whether on the lips of Christ himself or of his apostles. Practically every book of the New Testament speaks clearly of the persecution and suffering Christians should expect to undergo for their faith in Jesus and for living as he commanded. Some, like the Revelation to John, are entirely suffused with it. The terms in which this promise is put can be very stark. When his disciples ask him about “the close of the age,” Jesus tells them: “They will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. And then many will fall away” (Matt 24:9–10). This is not simply an end-time warning. Jesus promises the supreme blessing, a reward great in heaven, to those of every time and place who are despised and abused by the world because of their love for him, who do not fall away but bear it out to the end. “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt 5:11–12).

The Christian way of life gets its proper shape from the Cross, which is

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to say from sharing in the passion of Christ. "To you it has been granted that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for him" (Phil 1:29). Jesus repeatedly teaches would-be disciples that to follow him is to take up the Cross, to save one's soul is to lose one's life in this world for the sake of Jesus and his Gospel (e.g., Mark 8:34–5). The Cross, after all, is the world's final rejection of Jesus, and the ultimate act of the world's hatred of God. To take up the Cross is to share in that rejection and that hatred, to lose one's life in order to find it. Baptism is an invitation to martyrdom, and a promise of suffering at the hands of the world. When the time comes, even committed followers of Jesus will naturally find it difficult to accept the full depth of their faith's unworldliness, and to live out the final countercultural consequences of their baptism into the death of Jesus. But to shrink back is to lose one's life and not to find it. "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial which comes upon you to test you, as though something foreign were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share in the sufferings of Christ, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:12–13).

Modern Western Christians, Catholics certainly included, have long since become practiced at ignoring, or domesticating, the blunt insistence of their Scriptures on the world's abiding enmity toward Christ and those who belong to him, that is, toward the Church. We tend to regard it, like speaking in tongues or snake-handling, as belonging only to the earliest period of the Church's life. It has no universal and abiding application (or so we maintain). Perhaps some political arrangements and forms of government are inevitably at odds with the Church—that of ancient Rome, for example, with its obligatory veneration of the emperor, or modern communism, with its institutionalized atheism. But we in the modern West have developed a way of organizing our political life that poses no obstacles to the Church's faith and mission, or at least no obstacles the Church should not be willing and ready to accept. We have devised liberal democracy.

Throughout history human civilizations have usually supposed that a workable and coherent society requires agreement on ultimate matters, on the nature and destiny of the human beings who make up the society. A coherent society requires, in other words, a religion, and a high degree of agreement about the truth and goodness of what that religion proposes. The Roman Empire allowed for a great deal of linguistic, cultural, and even religious diversity, as long as there was general public compliance with the modest requirements of the official imperial religion, the cult of the emperor. Christianity, a growing missionary religion that categorically refused to participate in the imperial cult, the Romans understandably saw as a threat to the very existence of their society. For quite similar reasons

communist regimes have insisted that their vision of human nature and destiny cannot tolerate the presence of a militant Christianity in their midst. To a greater or lesser degree virtually all Muslim countries have done the same.

Liberal democracy in its various forms rejects this ancient premise about the organization of a coherent society. Among the assumptions at its heart is that religious agreement, a more or less common mind about ultimate matters, is unnecessary for social cohesion. Not only is religious agreement needless. Liberal democracies claim to abjure, as a matter of constitutional principle, any interest in the religious commitments of the peoples and societies they organize and govern. They require and promote no religion, and they allow all visions of the true and the good, all religions, to make their claims and flourish as they are able. This deliberate neutrality about ultimate matters is essential to what is "liberal" in liberal democracy. Liberal democracies require agreement not on ultimate matters, but on the rule of law, on procedures by which conflicts between competing visions of the true and the good can be settled, or lived with, in peace. They too will coerce, but only to bring about procedural, rather than religious, compliance.

Well into the nineteenth century the Catholic Church held firmly to the ancient idea that a coherent society requires religious unity. In the teaching of Pius IX, which clearly reflected traditional Catholic commitments, the normal situation for the Church is to be legally established and supported by the state, even if this is not always possible in practice. Liberal democracies of the time were correspondingly dubious about the Church's political aims and their spokesmen regularly wondered whether Catholicism was simply incompatible with a liberal polity. In the ensuing century Catholic thinking on the matter developed considerably, and the Second Vatican Council declared that freedom of conscience and freedom from religious coercion are basic human and civil rights, rooted in the inherent dignity of the human being and taught both by natural reason and the Christian revelation. These declarations have often been repeated and elaborated in subsequent papal teaching.

To liberal-democratic eyes, including those of many Catholics, the Church has belatedly caught up with enlightened modernity when it comes to identifying the most humane political arrangements and the proper relationship between the Church and the state. The modern liberal state cannot make anyone love Christ and his Church, and rightly has no interest in trying, but it can and will keep anyone from hating the Church, in just the sense in which Jesus foretells that the Church will be hated: persecuted for her public faith in him.

Recalling a few items of Catholic history in America may lead us to question whether our confidence in enlightened modernity and its political arrangements is as warranted as we have taken it to be.

II

Catholics first came to British America, to the English colonies of the North American east coast, in the early 1630s. They settled in Maryland, and the first Mass in British America was celebrated by the Jesuit Fr. Andrew White on the feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1634. The founder of the colony, George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, was himself a convert to Catholicism. He intended Maryland to be a refuge for persecuted English Catholics, at a time when it was a capital crime for a priest to say Mass in England. Calvert and his son insisted on a policy of religious toleration that was unusual for the day, and initially Catholics, Protestants, and even a small number of Jews lived together in Maryland, each practicing their religion.

It didn't last. By the early eighteenth century Anglicanism was legally established in Maryland and Catholic worship forbidden, under pressure from the Puritan colonies that surrounded it and the English government across the Atlantic. The suppression of Catholicism was vigorous, on the English model, though Maryland's penal laws did not extend to the public execution of Catholics. They did include double taxation, confiscation of property, loss of voting rights, and provision that, where possible, the children of Catholics be raised as Protestants—should one partner to a Catholic marriage die, their children were to be taken from the surviving spouse and given a Protestant upbringing. Catholics in Maryland were confronted with a hard truth, one that Catholics would face again when British America became the United States. The line between toleration and persecution is thin, whether the persecution be hard or soft. That line is certainly thinner than we would like to believe during the times when toleration has the upper hand. Written assurances of religious freedom are no guarantee that persecution will not gain the upper hand, and perhaps drive out toleration altogether.

A potent Catholic presence in the United States awaited the great waves of immigration from Catholic countries in the nineteenth century, first from Ireland and Germany, then from Italy and Eastern Europe. These Catholic immigrants found themselves amongst a native Protestant population that was, on the whole, uneasy with their presence and wary, above all, of their religion. Their worship was legally protected in the federal constitution, but the practice of their religion involved more than the Mass, basic and central though that is. Being Catholic is a way of life that

affects every aspect of day-to-day existence, and needs to be deliberately nurtured from cradle to grave. At great expense and sacrifice, and in the face of often quite determined resistance, these immigrant communities labored to build the institutions that would enable a fully Catholic life to be lived in their new country. This meant the construction not only of churches, but of monasteries, convents, and seminaries, and above all of a network of parish schools, colleges, and universities for the education of their children.

These generations of immigrants were remarkably successful at building a vibrant Catholic culture in America. Their rapidly increasing numbers and unashamed commitment to their religion largely compensated for their relative economic disadvantage and the ongoing resistance of established Protestantism. That resistance too began to moderate after the First World War.

Coincident with these developments, and probably to some extent caused by them, Catholicism began to have a more visible public presence in America, including in American popular culture. In 1928 a Catholic could be nominated for President by one of the major American political parties. Al Smith was soundly defeated, but even the anti-Catholicism of the "Christ-haunted" Protestant South (in Flannery O'Connor's phrase) was not enough to deter several southern states from carrying for the Democratic nominee. By the 1940s Catholic priests, nuns, and even visionaries could be depicted as appealing and sympathetic characters in award-winning Hollywood productions like "Boys Town," "Going My Way," and "The Song of Bernadette." In the 1950s Bishop Fulton J. Sheen flickered across the black and white screen on American network television, dressed in full episcopal regalia and talking about the meaning of life and the threat of communism in unmistakably Catholic terms.

To be sure, a lot of American Protestants still doubted whether Catholics were Christians and thought they were probably going to hell, and said so from the pulpit (some still do). Nonetheless American Catholics understandably become more and more confident that the United States was keeping its constitutional promise of religious freedom to them. Toleration was surely ascendant, if not yet the unchallenged norm, and the prospect of being hated for belonging to Jesus and his Church seemed increasingly remote.

Over time assimilation follows immigration, more or less inevitably, and so it was here. As the descendants of European Catholic immigrants became more successful in American life, economically and otherwise, they did not, on the whole, practice their faith less than their parents and grandparents had done (speaking, roughly, of the period from 1918 to

1968). They did, however, increasingly look for ways to minimize conflict between the teachings and values of Catholicism and those of the American culture and political system in which they now seemed more accepted and felt more at home, and in which they aspired to yet greater success.

In 1960, on his way to becoming the first, and so far the only, Catholic president of the United States, John F. Kennedy gave a speech before a gathering of Protestant ministers in Houston on just this point—a priceless encounter of assimilated Catholicism with nativist Protestantism. Kennedy assured the Protestant ministers that he did not see any conflict between his Catholic faith and his responsibilities as President to be “remotely possible.” But, he added, were he somehow to experience a conflict, so unlikely, as he saw it, between his conscience and “the national interest,” he would resign the presidency. He thereby vouched for his personal commitment to the Catholic Church and the Catholic faith, and at the same time for his determination that this commitment would make no difference to the way he conducted himself as President. He would be the first Catholic President, having pledged himself to govern as though he were not a Catholic—or, perhaps more precisely, not to allow his “private” Catholicism (Kennedy’s own term) to take him beyond what any non-Catholic American could rightly expect of the country’s President.²

Kennedy was subjected to a kind of religious persecution. He faced an organized effort to bar him from the highest political office in the land because he was a Catholic. He responded by saying that his private or personal life as a Catholic made no difference to his public life as a politician, at least no difference that anyone would notice or object to. Or less charitably, he held that he could effectively renounce his Catholicism when it came to political matters, while remaining fully a Catholic on the ground of his personal convictions. Kennedy was not, of course, the first person in the history of the Church who, for one reason or another, sought to play down the public significance of his Catholicism, or indeed to hide it from public view altogether. He took this step not in order avoid the loss of property, liberty, or life, as many Catholics before him had done, but to gain political office. The persecution he sought to overcome was of the relatively soft, rather than the truly hard, variety. He was no doubt sincere about “the absolute separation of church and state,” as he put it to the Houston Protestant ministers—about the political nullity of his own Catholicism.

Kennedy’s political strategy was, of course, successful (if just barely),

² The quoted phrases are from the text of the address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on the website of the JFK Library: jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-to-the-greater-houston-ministerial-association.

and his electoral triumph became exhibit A for many Catholics that the U.S. constitutional promise was now wholly fulfilled, and the persecution of Catholics in American liberal democracy irrevocably a thing of the past. This assurance was, in the event, deeply tied to an embrace of the strategy Kennedy himself had marked out. He clearly established a pattern that has since been followed by many American Catholic politicians, and many American Catholic voters. It is quite in order, they say, to accept the moral and social teachings of the Church while voting for politicians and public policies opposed to those teachings. On this view it makes perfectly good sense for a Catholic voter or politician to be, for example, personally opposed to abortion, or personally in favor of just treatment for immigrants, because that is what the Church teaches, while at the same time taking political actions that promote access to abortion or the forced breakup of immigrant families. In this way, they tell us, they act responsibly as Americans, refusing, as the American system requires, to impose their personal religious faith on their fellow citizens, and so avoiding any conflict between their Catholicism and what JFK called “the national interest.”

This mentality—privately opposed, but publicly in favor—has rightly been criticized as incoherent. For the justice of that criticism we can briefly mention three reasons.

(1) In no important sense is Catholicism private. A person cannot plausibly put her Catholicism, or someone else’s, at the same level of political importance as her taste for Nestlé’s Crunch bars or her distaste for Brussels sprouts. Like most religions, Catholicism is an all-encompassing way of life, concerned above all with what is finally true and false, right and wrong. It is not simply a matter of likes and dislikes.

(2) To profess that an act is morally evil, while opposing any effort to curtail its occurrence, is self-deception. We rightly judge the intentions and commitments of people, moral and otherwise, by what they do and what they encourage others to do, not by what they say they believe.

(3) Surely the American system, the separation of church and state rightly understood, does not require American Catholics to refuse public support for the social teachings of the Church, lest they “impose their faith” on non-Catholics. A Catholic voter or legislator can, for example, accept the Church’s teaching that abortion is intrinsically evil, seek laws coherent with those teachings, and do so as a matter of Catholic conscience, without acting against the basic values of the American political system. Otherwise we are saying that only policies opposed to Catholic social teaching, or at minimum policies enacted only for reasons that have nothing to do with Catholicism, are possible within the American system.

If this were right, if deeply religious reasons and motivations were illegitimate in the American “public square,” then we would have to say that Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement were illegitimate, and similarly anti-slavery and abolitionism in the nineteenth century.

One cannot help noticing that the dichotomy between private belief and public duty now widely taken for granted by American Catholics ironically joins hands with the nativism their immigrant ancestors worked so hard to overcome. To say, for example, that when Catholics publicly oppose abortion or support immigration reform they are impermissibly “imposing their faith” on others is to accept the nativist assumption that Catholic principle is incompatible with responsible participation in a democratic polity. If the American system does in fact require such political self-annihilation on the part of Catholics, then conflict between the American political system and Catholic principle runs far deeper than JFK, even on his darkest nights, would have thought possible.

III

Kennedy’s speech does raise a good question, though. What difference should being Catholic make to our understanding of, and participation in, American democracy? Kennedy’s answer was, in essence, that it shouldn’t make any difference. That can’t be right, but it does prompt reflection on how Catholic faith ought to shape political commitments in the American system, and in pluralist democracies more generally.

For Catholic faith and principle to make a difference in political life is, we need to be clear, inseparable from the possibility that political conflict may result from faithful adherence to those principles. To hold that no conflict is possible, as JFK supposed, entails that Catholic faith and principle can, in the nature of the case, make no political difference. But Catholic principles and the actions they require can be, and regularly are, resisted in democratic societies by those who do not share them. If they made no difference they would not be resisted. The same goes for other forms of religious commitment and equally for adherence to various secular principles, though the proponents of current secular ideologies are generally far less reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of conflict than are religious people, perhaps especially Catholics. We can always forsake principle in order to avoid disagreement, but that simply underlines the fact that commitment to religious principle carries with it the possibility of political conflict.

How then should Catholics act, and what should they expect from the political regimes they now inhabit in the West? Well before Vatican II the Catholic Church developed a substantial body of teaching on the place of

the Church and the Catholic faith in modern political life. Two important aspects of that teaching will help answer our question.

Among the most basic elements of modern Catholic social and political doctrine is the idea of the common good. Catholics are called upon by their faith and by the explicit teaching of their Church to work for the common good of the societies in which they live. That they should expect to be hated for their love of Jesus does not relieve them of the obligation to work for the social good even of those who hate them. These societies often include lots of non-Catholics, whether they be Protestants, adherents of other religions, or adherents of no religion. In some cases, as in the U.S., non-Catholics make up a considerable majority of the society as a whole, even though Catholics are by far the largest single religious group within that society. Catholics are thus called, by their fidelity to God in Jesus Christ, to work and pray not only for the good of themselves and other Catholics in their society, but for the good of all non-Catholics as well. The Church sees these works of mercy not only as the responsibility of each individual Catholic, but of the Catholic Church as such, and so she has from the beginning built hospitals, schools, and universities, shelters for the homeless and kitchens for the hungry and thirsty. Even before the toleration of Christianity in ancient Rome, the Romans looked on with amazement at the readiness of Christians to care for all the sick, not just their own, and to bury all the dead, not just their own. As the Romans knew, and feared, these were political acts, with world-changing consequences.

A further basic element of Catholic social and political teaching, deeply tied to the common good and the social nature of human beings, is respect for the dignity of the human person. Each human being is made in the image of the triune God, and called to eternal intimacy with this God. From this dignity flow rights that are intrinsic to each human being, rights that simply go with being human. These rights are not granted by society, such that they might also be taken away by it, but are prior to society itself and belong to the basis of society and the common good.

Among the rights that flow from the divinely given dignity of each human being, the most basic is the right to life itself. If the common good includes all that is necessary to lead a truly human life, then the foundation of the common good, its most basic necessity, is for each human being to be allowed to live in the first place. The right to life is simply the right not to be killed between the natural beginning and end of this life, between conception and natural death. This right belongs to every human being, but above all, and in a completely unqualified way, to the innocent and vulnerable, whom it is never permissible to kill for any reason at all. This conception of human dignity and of the right to life is at the heart of

social justice as Catholics understand it. Of a piece with it are, for example, the Church's insistence on care for immigrants and her opposition to slavery and human trafficking, as to all practices that degrade human beings and threaten their lives.

Even from these brief comments it will be clear that "the common good" is very much a normative idea. The common good could not be attained by giving everyone what they want, even if that were possible, which it isn't (in giving some people what they want you will inevitably deny it to other people, who want the opposite). Nor can it be attained by giving the majority what it wants. That depends, obviously, on what the majority wants, and on whether the desires of the majority are in accord with the common good. Since it is normative and content-laden, we should expect that Catholic teaching on the common good will be contested, and even more that the public practices which embody that teaching will be opposed. The Catholic idea of the common good will, when acted upon, cause conflict. There are, as we should expect, other conceptions of the good, common or otherwise, on offer in our democratic society, and these are sometimes in very sharp conflict with the Catholic conception.

Up to a point Catholic teaching on the common good and human dignity appeals to natural law, and its truth is thus, at least in principle, available to any human being. The essential elements of human dignity are included, that is, in a divinely given orientation to seek good and shun evil that can never be uprooted from human nature. This commonplace of Catholic moral theology leads some contemporary Catholic intellectuals to suppose that it should be possible to convince anyone who will listen that, for example, abortion is in every case morally evil. Because, they maintain, abortion is against the natural law—which of course it is—any reasonably attentive person can come to recognize that it is evil by recourse to items of knowledge easily available without appeal to religious beliefs of any sort, including Catholic ones.

This view comes closer to JFK's logic than most of its advocates would like to admit. They suppose, in effect, that they can pretend to be atheists and still win the argument. That can happen, of course, but it would be naïve to expect it to happen very often. The natural law is one thing; knowledge of the natural law and action in accord with that knowledge are another. We cannot change our nature, nor can we change the law of our nature. But we can certainly be mistaken about it, including about what the law of our nature requires, about whether nature has a law, and about whether we have a nature in the first place. And we can, as current unapologetic defenses of "post-birth abortion"—infanticide—show, be utterly, and viciously, committed to our mistakes.

When you get down to it, the Church's idea of the common good is a distinctively Catholic one, and its primary reasons for insisting on that idea are, unsurprisingly, Catholic reasons. The Catholic idea of the common good is rooted in the conviction that we are creatures of the triune God, whose ultimate good lies in intimacy with this God. Augustine put this basic conviction in a way Catholics have remembered ever since: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."³ Nothing can belong to the common good, as Catholics understand it, which does not in one way or another help human beings come to rest in God.

That Catholics have distinctively Catholic reasons for the political decisions they make and the social policies they support does not preclude them from agreeing with non-Catholics, religious or non-religious, on those decisions and policies. Jews and Muslims will have their own reasons for sharing with Catholics a desire, for example, to see religious freedom flourish in American society, or to see abortion end. Those reasons will probably overlap to some extent with the reasons offered by Catholics, but they will also differ, especially when it comes to the most basic and decisive reasons. Yet they can fully agree on the political good to be achieved. Of course they can also disagree about it. Either way, that those who belong to the Church act precisely as Catholics in their political decisions does not make them less than fully responsible participants in a pluralist democracy, any more than it does for Jews to act as Jews or Muslims as Muslims. Catholics do not have to pretend that they are atheists in order to make responsible political decisions, any more than the adherents of any other religion do.

IV

So the Catholic Church teaches, with, since Vatican II, an authority that cannot be exceeded in the Church's own life. On a Catholic view of things, different kinds of political arrangements can be morally legitimate, as long as they serve the common good of the society they order and govern. This is not to say that all legitimate forms of government are equally good or desirable. With its ringing endorsement of freedom of conscience and freedom from coercion in religion, Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae* does tilt toward a particularly characteristic value claimed by modern liberal democracies. Whatever its political system, a just society will not, in the Catholic view, use its system of government to impose anything when it comes to religion, but will allow each religious community to decide what its convictions

³ Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1.

require of it, and to act on those convictions within the broad limits of public order and the common good. Pluralist democracies like our own claim to embody just this ideal.

When *Dignitatis Humanae* became Catholic doctrine in 1965, the suggestion that the on-the-ground reality of Western liberalism basically coincided with its teaching made a good deal of sense. Accordingly the Council's text on religious liberty was welcomed by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Things have changed a lot since then.

As Catholics in colonial America already discovered, religious freedom is not irrevocable in the modern West, even in societies which see themselves as havens for it. As other religious communities have learned, and as American Catholics are once again learning, that Western constitutions enshrine freedom of conscience and religion among their most basic stated values fails to guarantee that Catholics and others will not be subject to religious coercion. The reality of religious life in Western democracies is now often markedly removed from the ideals professed in the founding documents of those democracies, ideals which the Catholic Church herself teaches with particular insistence and clarity. State coercion in matters of religion, demanded and encouraged by potent forces in American society, is an increasingly vivid fact of American life. In one of recent history's more piquant ironies, the Catholic Church is now the world's foremost institutional defender of religious freedom, while Western democracies seem increasingly inclined to limit that freedom, and to induce conformity with a distinctively secular conception of ultimate matters.

It seems not to be enough, for example, that abortion is legal in all fifty states, and medically assisted suicide in some. Catholic nurses and physicians who object in conscience to these acts must be compelled to participate in them, on pain of losing their jobs, their licenses, and their livelihoods. It seems not to be enough that contraception and abortion are available at government expense to employees of Catholic religious orders and universities; these Catholic institutions must be compelled to pay for them. In these particular cases the coercion sought by the U.S. government and recently contested in the courts is for the moment in abeyance. It would be exceedingly optimistic to suppose that the precarious conscience protections currently in place will not be subject to further pressure, and to renewed demands for coercion aimed at bringing Catholics and other religious Americans into line with the beliefs and values of those who make the demands. As one wealthy secular crusader against conscience protections for religious Americans likes to put it, "We're going to punish the wicked."

At present the most obvious attacks on the freedom of the Church

and the right of her members to lead a fully Catholic life come from the political left, and focus especially on abortion and sexual morality. The aggressions of secularism—the unashamed culture of death—may mislead us into thinking that the reality confronting the Church is simply the contempt of liberal elites for traditional religion.

That would be a mistake. It is the world that hates the Church and wants to silence her witness to Christ, not just liberal elites. Persecution of the Church comes from the political right as well as from the left. In the Reagan years—not so long ago—spies we sent into Christian congregations in pursuit of immigrants from non-approved Central American countries, and priests, religious sisters, and Protestant ministers were jailed for sheltering and feeding these immigrants. What Catholics call the corporal works of mercy (Matt 25) were criminalized by the U.S. government. The current anti-immigrant rhetoric of the American right is, in the end, a demand to reinstate this regime on a much more massive scale.

That this resurgent nativism has Catholic acolytes shows that assimilated Catholicism in America, contemptuous of the Church's teaching on human dignity, isn't simply a phenomenon of the political left—the heirs of JFK. Of course the cynical open-border policy of the left is just as clearly opposed to Catholic teaching. It barter the suffering of countless immigrant families for the hope of future political advantage in places like Texas and Arizona. Catholics like Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush have proposed immigration policies for this country in accord with Catholic teaching on human dignity, and drawn scorn from both right and left. Following Catholic principle, they have sealed their own political doom.

The reason for the present zeal to attack the freedom of the Catholic Church and other traditional religious communities in the United States is not mysterious or obscure. It is itself a straightforwardly religious zeal, rooted in the fact that we all tend to absolutize our beliefs, especially those bearing on matters we take to be of the greatest, or even ultimate, importance. With that we tend to regard opposition to those beliefs as wicked, an evil that must be rooted out. The ancient idea that a coherent society requires agreement in ultimate matters is a sober recognition of the innate religious zeal of human beings.

The Catholic Church, along with some other long-established religious communities, has much experience with this basic human impulse and the dangers it poses. Our deep-seated religious yearning is in truth a restless desire for God, but it can go terribly wrong—especially when we have grown weary of the worldly renunciations our yearning for God requires of us. Just because religious matters are of truly ultimate, indeed absolute, significance, freedom of conscience for those who believe and act other-

wise must be carefully guarded. Knowing only their own rectitude, the current promoters of religious coercion—the persecution, soft at least for the time being, of traditional religious communities—have no such regard for those who believe otherwise.

One might object that for Catholics to worry about persecution just now is inopportune, at best. It fails to help us reckon with the crisis currently confronting the Church in America and elsewhere and, so the objection goes, may easily provide an all too convenient excuse for evading the real issue. Persecution comes from the outside; it is unjust treatment of the Church and her members, rooted in animosity toward the Church's faith and the witness of her life. What we are now seeing is not that, but the opposite: the just accusation of the state against crimes committed inside the Church.

This is an accurate description of the situation we now face. In fact we have to go farther. Not all crimes against the law of the land are sins against God and neighbor. We must, for example, shelter the homeless and feed the hungry, whether they are in this country legally or not. But the crimes of which some priests and bishops stand credibly accused are grave sins against God, and against the faithful committed to their charge. Just criticism of the Church, and just action (including legal action) against those who have public responsibility in the Church, sometimes comes from the outside, and sometimes from without before it comes from within. So, to our great sorrow, it is now.

We cannot, then, confuse just action of the state against the Church, even that of the aggressively secular state, with persecution. That an action is just, however, does not mean that its motives are unmixed. Rigorous civil proceedings against the perpetrators and enablers of clergy sexual abuse can be motivated by sympathy for the victims and indignation at the vile crimes committed against them. But they can also be motivated by animosity toward the Church's faith and the witness of her life. They can, of course, be motivated by both at the same time. Among the most grievous aspects of the present crisis is that many of those called to witness in a special way to the Church's faith and her way of life—to make public the call to holiness—have themselves provided choice weapons to the enemies of Christ and his Church. These can, and no doubt will, be used against the Church and her proclamation of the Gospel well into the future, not only by those who rightly seek justice for the innocent, but by those who detest the Catholic faith. And like Israel in exile, the innocent in the Church will have to suffer with the guilty.

In 1965 many American Catholics thought the Church and American society were, after a long history of mutual distrust, finally entering into a

relationship of overlapping values and mutual support. This was a reasonable supposition at the time. In retrospect, though, 1965 may prove to have been a high-water mark for the toleration of Catholicism in America. For about a century, roughly from the end of the First World War, Catholic life unfolded, and the Catholic Church went about her divine mission, relatively unhindered in this country. Rather than being the normal state of affairs, this may turn out—it is too early to tell for sure, of course—to have been more in the nature of an interlude. The Protestant grip on American public life was loosening enough to leave Catholics more or less alone, but enough of the Protestant vision of ultimate matters remained, for a while, to provide a public moral framework on which Catholics could largely agree.

The Protestant moral consensus is now long gone. Of that *Griswold v. Connecticut*, to say nothing of *Roe v. Wade*, was fair warning, though it took a while for the truth to sink in. The legislative and judicial procedures of the American system were long used to bolster a Protestant vision of ultimate matters. They are now being used, often effectively, to promote and enforce a secular vision, in which man's final end is dogmatically denied, and each person burdened with defining it as he sees fit.

The aim of liberal democracy was to foreswear the task of producing agreement on ultimate matters without denying the freedom of citizens to form communities of faith which do just that. The American founding presupposed a Protestant moral consensus, and democracy in America lived off that capital for generations. By deliberate design the apparatus of liberal democracy is impotent to produce agreement on ultimate matters where it is not already present. When widespread agreement about ultimate matters is absent, as it now is in America, the agreement necessary for a functioning society is likely to come, as it usually has, by coercion and violence (recall the Civil War). We are experiencing a perverse theologizing of liberal democracy, which demands an enforced agnosticism about ultimate matters—the war of personal freedom against religious freedom. The condition for participation in public life is that one not have a faith with any public consequences, or indeed any public presence. The only admissible religion under this regime is one that is not practiced, just silently believed. Under these circumstances, Catholics—and, indeed, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims, to the extent that they depart from the culture's secular theology—should not expect that liberal democracy will protect them individually from coercion, still less that it will protect the freedom of their communities. For Catholics, especially, the twentieth-century American experience may turn out to have been only a respite, welcome breathing space, between one coercion and another.

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“The world hates me,” Jesus says, “because I bear witness concerning it that its works are evil” (John 7:7). Modern liberal democracy might be the best system yet devised by the mind of man for coping peacefully with conflicts over the true and the good. But it cannot make them go away; still less can it make the opposition of the world and the Church go away. That opposition goes much too deep for any political system to remove, though politics can do its best to secure a degree of order, an always partial and temporary peace. As Augustine, above all, taught the Catholic Church, the world’s opposition to the Church is neither arbitrary nor transitory. It stems from a primordial conflict of loves. “Two loves, then, have formed two cities. Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, formed the earthly city, and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, the heavenly city. The one glories in itself, the other in the Lord.”⁴ Christ and his Church bear witness to this world that it is passing away, that its love is evil and issues in death. Liberal democracy is neutral, at least in principle, about ultimate matters, but human beings are not neutral—least of all those who claim to have no convictions about what is finally true and good. They will use whatever instruments present themselves, certainly including the procedural devices of liberal democracy, in the hope of securing the triumph of their love.

In just this world the Catholic Church lives and serves God and all human beings, under whatever political arrangements happen to obtain. Catholic teaching, not least that of the Second Vatican Council, plainly recognizes this abiding state of affairs. So the Council reminds us, borrowing words of Augustine: “The Church, ‘like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God,’ announcing the cross and death of the Lord until He comes.”⁵ As we sojourn in this foreign land, tracing by faith the way to that city “whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10), we must work tirelessly for the good of all people, as God has made it known to us. We should not expect, though, that our work will create for us, or for anyone, a home in this world. The world will offer us homes on its own terms, whether those of the left or of the right. But the blandishments of the world offer no peace, no home that lasts. Our peace lies, and will always lie, beyond this world.

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⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.28.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §8.