

The Politics of Chastity

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REINHARD HÜTTER HAS AUTHORED an excellent and much-needed essay on the virtue of chastity, with a special focus on the unprecedented threat to this virtue posed by contemporary online pornography.¹ His essay addresses the moral and spiritual aspects of the issue, as illuminated by both natural law and divine revelation. But there is also a crucial *political* dimension that the essay does not address, though it too is illuminated by Hütter's insights. I propose in this essay to supplement Hütter's account with some remarks on this dimension.

Sex and Human Nature

The political dimension I want to address is neither peripheral to chastity nor related to it only contingently. For, together with the moral and spiritual aspects of chastity, it follows directly and necessarily from our nature as rational social animals. This is evident from the traditional Thomistic natural law account of the foundations of sexual morality, so I will begin with an exposition of that.

The fundamental way in which we are social animals is by being *familial* animals. And sex—both in the sense of there being two sexes, and in the sense of the sexual act—exists for the purpose of creating new families. In particular, the distinctive physiology and psychology of male human beings exists for the sake of making them fathers, and the distinctive physiology

¹ Chapter 8 of *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019). The chapter is a revised version of the article “Chastity and the Scourge of Pornography,” *The Thomist* 77 (2013): 1–39.

and psychology of female human beings exists for the sake of making them mothers. Of course, not all men and women actually become fathers and mothers, but the point is that that is what their being either men or women in the first place is *for*. If we did not reproduce in a way that required fathers and mothers, there would be no males and no females. Hence there would be no sex organs, no sexual arousal, and no sexual act.

Now, the most obvious respect in which sex has this teleology is that male sexual physiology and arousal have the biological function of getting semen into the vagina, whereas female sexual physiology and arousal have the biological function of facilitating reception of the semen, so as to get the sperm it contains into proximity with an ovum, so that pregnancy will result. It is often assumed that getting this plumbing right is the main concern of the natural law theorist. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, the natural law theorist does insist on getting the plumbing right, but that is because the plumbing *ultimately* exists for the sake of a larger and more important end—just like a beaver's teeth *ultimately* exist for the sake of building shelters for beaver families, their function of gnawing trees so as to provide materials for beaver dams (which in turn provide the setting for the shelters) being merely an essential means to that end.²

The *locus classicus* for Aquinas's treatment of these matters is the discussion in *Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 2, nos. 122–26. There is a little bit there about emissions of semen and the like, but there is much, much more about what children and mothers need in order for family life to be possible, and how fathers have to provide it. That is to say, Aquinas's treatment of what it is to be a man or a woman goes well beyond having sex organs of a certain kind and using them in a certain way, and that is exactly what we should expect given that we are *social* animals, and *rational* social animals. Sex is for making you a father or a mother, with *all* that that entails given our social and rational nature, and any deliberate use of sex that positively frustrates that end (with *all* that it entails given our rational and social nature) is as contrary to what is good for us as breaking off teeth or gnawing only rocks rather than trees is contrary to what is good for beavers.

Now, one way this might happen is when a man sleeps with a woman to whom he has not committed himself in the way definitive of marriage. For any children that result from such acts, and the woman too who becomes a mother as a result, will be left helpless by such a man. Aquinas emphasizes several respects in which this is so. First, mother and children are in need of material provision, yet especially when the children are young

² I borrow this example from Steven J. Jensen, *Knowing the Natural Law* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 72–73.

it is very difficult for the mother to supply this herself. Second, it is not only material provision children need, for they are rational animals and thus need education as well, which takes a long time. Third, they need not only maternal nurturing but paternal discipline. All of this is the work of many years, and thus requires the stable commitment of being a husband. Providing all of these things is no less part of the role of father than emitting semen is, and thus it is toward the fulfillment of *this whole paternal/husbandly function* that a man's sexual faculties point. A woman's sexual faculties point toward the fulfillment of *the whole maternal/wifely function* that complements the paternal one. In this way, there is for the natural law theorist a natural teleological connection between sex, marriage, and child-rearing, rather than a merely conventional one.

When natural law theorists say that sex has a *procreative* function, then, they do not mean merely that it has the function of generating new animals, but that it has the function of generating new animals *of the social and rational type*, with the long-term commitment that that entails. The making of a new rational social animal is not completed with birth, but only when children have matured to the point that they are capable of leaving home and beginning families of their own. To have sex is to carry out an action that has *all of that* as its teleology, just as for a beaver to gnaw at a tree is to carry out an action that has the sheltering of the beaver's family as its teleology. And in both cases, this larger teleological context determines what counts as healthy or dysfunctional (and thus good or bad) behavior.

Of course, sex is pleasurable, but the pleasure of sex has its own teleology, just as the pleasure the beaver takes in gnawing trees or eating nuts and the like does. In both cases, the end or point of the pleasure is to draw the animal toward carrying out the action with which the pleasure is associated. But here too, it is the *whole* teleological picture that must be kept in view, not just the sexual act considered in isolation. And here as in every other aspect of our animal nature, our social and rational nature gives new significance to what in a non-human animal might be mere pleasurable sensations. Hence the pleasure of sex has as its natural end the drawing of the rational animal toward fatherhood or motherhood and the family life that that entails. And that is why, in rational animals, sexual desire comes to be associated with romantic fantasy, idealization of the sexual partner, a disposition toward playfulness and affection, and so on. What cognitive scientists call "theory of mind" plays a crucial role as well, insofar as sexual desire typically involves not just a desire to sleep with another person but also the desire that the other person wants the same and feels a similar attraction. The pleasure looked forward to is not the mere release of one's own bodily tension but rather a shared pleasure in an essentially interper-

sonal activity. The perceptual and affective components of sexual arousal and pleasure are, in human beings, fused with an irreducible conceptual element. Thus, as Aquinas writes, “the lower powers follow the motion of the higher if that motion is more intense (as we see that a man’s whole body is inflamed and set in motion at the sight of a woman he loves).”³

Thomistic natural law theorists thus hold that in addition to its procreative end, the sexual act has a *unitive* end, but that this second end is subsidiary to the first insofar as it exists in order to facilitate the first. Aquinas notes that “the greatest friendship between husband and wife” can be produced by their commitment to a common domestic project together with “the act of fleshly union, which produces a certain gentle association even among beasts.”⁴ But it is *because* sex is for creating new families that it also happens in this way to facilitate a bond between spouses. If there were no such procreative end, there would not be two different sexes, and thus no sexual act, and thus none of the pleasure and gentle association the sexual act produces. In short, the procreative end provides the larger teleological context within which the unitive end must be understood.

Unnatural Sexuality

Now, it is for the purpose of facilitating this unitive end, so that the procreative end might in turn be fulfilled, that sex involves “the *greatest* of pleasures . . . [which] absorb the mind more than any others.”⁵ The upside of this is that sexual pleasure can function as a kind of superglue that bonds a man and woman together long enough for a new family to get started, and retains enough strength to help maintain a stable bond even after the initial intensity of romantic passion has subsided. The downside is that, precisely because sexual pleasure is the most intense of pleasures, it has the greatest tendency to cloud reason. In particular, when we take pleasure in what is contrary to the teleology of sex, and especially when we become habituated in doing so, it becomes harder for us to acknowledge that teleology, and easier to engage in rationalizations that blind us to it. And this can corrupt

³ Thomas Aquinas, *On Love and Charity: Readings from the “Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard,”* trans. Peter A. Kwasniewski, Thomas Bolin, O.S.B., and Joseph Bolin (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 34.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III, ch. 123, in *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence, Part II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 148.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 46. a. 3, in *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (New York: Benziger, 1948); emphasis added.

reason in general, insofar as the very idea of a natural order of things that implies that indulgence of some pleasures is dysfunctional, and therefore bad, becomes hateful to us. Accordingly, Aquinas identifies what he calls “blindness of mind” as the chief of the “daughters” of lust or sexual vice, and argues that sexual vices more than any other tend to erode “prudence” or the capacity for practical reason.⁶

Hence, consider some of the behaviors and habits that natural law theory condemns as contrary to the natural teleology of sex. Fornication tends to bring children into the world outside of the stable two-parent family unit they need for their full maturation. Hence while an act of fornication is not *per se* contrary to the *proximate* end of the sexual act (the climax which brings both insemination and emotional bonding), it is contrary to its *ultimate* end (the creation and maintenance of a stable marital-cum-family unit). You might say that such an act is directed toward the right sort of object, but in the wrong sort of context. Homosexual acts, though, are not even directed toward the right sort of object, and are on the natural law analysis contrary to the proximate end as well as the remote end. If the fornicator is like a beaver who gnaws on trees but does not build dams, the person acting on homosexual desire is like the beaver who gnaws on rocks instead of trees.

Now, repeated indulgence in and rationalization of fornication dulls the intellect’s capacity to see the natural end of sex and the will’s capacity to pursue it, making sexual pleasure an end in itself rather than a facilitator of a larger purpose. Repeated indulgence in and rationalization of homosexual desire has an even greater tendency to dull the intellect and will in these ways, since it is not even directed toward the right sort of object. The intense pleasure associated with such behaviors “superglues” the mind onto ends other than the natural one, hardening one’s orientation in an unnatural direction, like a kind of psychological crippling. Aristotle compares habituated homosexual desire to the compulsion to eat dirt or other nonnutritive substances, a disorder known as *pica*.⁷ Just as *pica* would be no less dysfunctional even if it turned out to have a genetic basis, so too, for the natural law theorist, homosexual desire would be no less dysfunctional even if it turned out to have a genetic basis. That would entail, not the absence of psychological dysfunction, but rather the presence of both psychological and genetic dysfunction.

As habituated and rationalized sexual vice becomes more widespread, it inevitably takes a toll on the stability of the family, as individuals no

⁶ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 153, a. 5; q. 53, a. 6.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.6.1148b15–19a 20.

longer see it as the end for which sexual desire exists. Instead of seeking to restrain and reform disordered sexual desire in a way that will be conducive to strengthening the institution of the family, they seek to alter the institution of the family in a way that will be conducive to indulging whatever disordered sexual desires they happen to have. The tail comes to wag the dog. The natural order of things becomes harder to see and people become less willing to see it. Increasing numbers of children come to lack the stability and discipline provided by parents who sacrifice their short-term desires for the good of the family, and are neither encouraged nor prepared to form such stable and self-sacrificing unions themselves. In these ways, sexual vice strikes deep at both our rational nature and our social nature.

Sexual Immorality as Social Injustice

It has become a cliché in modern political life that what happens in the bedroom between consenting adults hurts no one else and therefore ought not to be the concern of the state. The account just sketched implies that nothing could be further from the truth, and recent history confirms it. Consider the effects of fornication, which has become extremely common as the social stigma against it has virtually disappeared in the decades since the beginning of the Sexual Revolution. One effect has been widespread fatherlessness, which has trapped millions of children in poverty, drug addiction, gang activity, and other criminality. Another effect has been millions of abortions. In short—and as Aquinas would have predicted—widespread fornication has led to an enormous number of poor children, delinquent children, and dead children. Thus does sex, which has as its natural end the *generation, rearing, and education* of children, now regularly lead by way of illegitimacy and abortion to the *impoverishment, moral corruption, and murder* of children.

Another effect has been widespread denial of this reality. To be sure, academic social scientists and political commentators occasionally acknowledge the ill effects of fatherlessness. But very few are willing to draw the conclusion that the Sexual Revolution was a mistake and that the social stigmas it swept away ought to be restored. The tendency is to blame the resulting pathologies on other things—racism, insufficient government spending, and so on—when the true cause is staring them in the face. Thus has habituation in sexual vice brought about exactly the sort of corruption of intellect and will that Aquinas characterized as the “daughters of lust.”

The mainstreaming of fornication as a way of life has also harmed women, and even men, in ways Aquinas would not be surprised by. Having made themselves sexually available throughout their fertile years but also

practicing contraception and abortion, large numbers of women now find themselves without husbands, childless, and lonely when those years are past. Large numbers of men have become aimless and prone to risky behavior without the purpose and discipline that the role of husband and father provides.

The pathologies resulting from fornication do not merely harm the men, women, and children immediately involved, but spread out to society at large. Women become more dependent on state assistance, which undermines subsidiarity. The greater tendency toward gang activity and criminality among young men who grow up without fathers leads to neighborhoods becoming unsafe. These neighborhoods also become impoverished, since their lack of safety makes them less able to support businesses. Gang activity and criminality also lead to higher incidences of violent confrontations with police, the sequel to which is greater distrust of police, racial tensions, and the like, which then lead to further criminality and general social unrest. Children who do not know anything but these dysfunctional arrangements tend to create them anew when they grow up and have children of their own, so that the pathologies recur generation after generation.

Other aspects of the Sexual Revolution reinforce this breakdown in the stability of the family. Even when people do marry, liberalized divorce laws and the disappearance of the stigma against divorce make it less likely that marriages will last. The normalization of homosexuality has massively reinforced the attitude that sex is fundamentally about pleasure and personal fulfillment, with child-rearing and the formation of a new family unit coming to be seen as optional extras rather than the whole point of sex. The influence of feminism has massively eroded the once commonsense understanding that women are by nature directed toward a maternal/wifely role and men are by nature directed toward a paternal/husbandly role. Transgenderism has eroded this understanding even further, and popularized the idea that sex roles are entirely conventional, fluid, and optional. Indeed, feminism and transgenderism have represented traditional sex roles as positively oppressive.

Now, the family is the fundamental social unit, so that the common good of society as a whole depends on the health of the family. This traditional conclusion of natural law theory is confirmed by the pathologies that have followed upon the weakening of the family in the wake of the Sexual Revolution. Though some aspects of this revolution are often defended in the name of social justice, they are in fact instances of the most fundamental kind of social *injustice*, destructive as they are of the fundamental unit of society.

Since government exists in order to safeguard the common good, government has a grave duty in justice to promote the health of the family, and thus to oppose the tendencies I have been describing. In fact, though, modern Western governments have not only not opposed them, but have encouraged them and in some cases even written them into law. Examples would be the legalization and subsidization of abortion, liberalized divorce laws, the legalization and subsidization of contraception, the legalization of pornography, the legalization of same-sex marriage, the subsidization of day care in order to facilitate the entry of mothers into the work force, the inculcation of feminism and acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism via the public education system and antidiscrimination laws, the forcing of businesses and religious organizations to fund contraception for employees, and so on.

In these ways, the modern state has to a large extent become a kind of “pornocracy” that directly pits itself against the family and against the virtue of chastity that is its safeguard. It has to that extent made itself the agent of the most basic kind of social injustice—and thus, to that extent, tyrannical. (It is worth recalling Plato’s warning in the *Republic* that the tyrant is the man dominated by his passions, and above all by lust.) To be sure, there are countervailing tendencies, and much that modern states do that is perfectly legitimate and necessary. All the same, we must face up to the reality, disturbing as it is, that the modern liberal democratic state seems to be evolving into something diabolically *contra naturam*.

Pornography as a Universal Acid

To begin to tie my discussion in to the themes of Hütter’s essay, we might note the role that pornography, and our highly sexualized popular culture more generally, play in upholding this unjust regime.

The bad effects of habitual pornography use are often noted even by secular psychologists. Habitual viewers often have unrealistic expectations of real-life sexual partners and sexual encounters, a tendency to depersonalize the sexual act, and sometimes even problems with impotence. They often become desensitized to what was once titillating and require ever more extreme content in order to maintain arousal. Pornography use often becomes compulsive, as does the masturbation that is its concomitant. A spouse’s addiction to pornography is implicated in many divorces.

Naturally, the procreative end of sex recedes from the habitual pornography user’s view, as the pleasure of sex becomes an end in itself. But the unitive end of sex is undermined as well. Sexual arousal and desire have as their natural teleology the direction of a person *outward* toward another

person, and the intensity of the pleasure of climax is intended to bond the person emotionally to that other. By contrast, the fantasy world of the pornography user is *internal to* himself, and the pleasure of his masturbatory climax locks him into this private fantasy realm and increasingly unable to find similar satisfaction in a real human being. Worse, the need to find ever more extreme subject matter in order to achieve the same levels of titillation entails that the pleasure he takes in the associated masturbatory climax will “superglue” him onto ever more disordered habits of thought and feeling where sex is concerned.

This is all bad enough, though so far the damage I have been describing directly affects individual users and their immediate relationships to other human beings. But insofar as the use of pornography undermines the stability of the relationships between men and women, and thus the stability of the family, it naturally has a ripple effect on society at large. Moreover, the use of pornography is known to affect users’ opinions about matters of sex at a more philosophical level, and where they touch on public policy. For example, social scientists have noted a correlation between a tendency to use pornography and a tendency to support same-sex marriage.⁸

Now, as Aquinas notes, disordered sexual pleasures “above all debauch a man’s mind” and “more than anything else work the greatest havoc in a man’s mind.”⁹ With pornography use, they do so in an especially insidious way, because the costs are not as immediate or dramatic as they are with fornication (where an unintended pregnancy can result), adultery (where a jealous spouse can cause one harm), or promiscuity (where venereal disease and jilted lovers can cause harm). Moreover, unlike other sexual sins, pornography use is now extremely easy to indulge in and in a way that can be kept secret indefinitely. One need not convince another person to participate in a sexual act or even to sell one the materials, thereby risking embarrassment and exposure. All one needs is a cell phone, and portrayals of the most debauched acts imaginable are seconds away.

Now, as Aquinas teaches, it is not possible to suppress all immorality through human law, and governments ought not to try to do so. He writes:

Human law is framed for a number of human beings, the majority of whom are not perfect in virtue. Wherefore human laws do not forbid all vices, from which the virtuous abstain, but only the more

⁸ See Mark Regnerus, “Porn Use and Supporting Same-Sex Marriage,” *Public Discourse*, December 20, 2012.

⁹ Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q. 153, a. 1.

grievous vices, from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained: thus human law prohibits murder, theft and such like.¹⁰

If the state were to try to extirpate all sexual immorality, it would in the nature of the case have to extend its reach as far as possible into the private sphere, and would not succeed even then, given the very strong temptations associated with sex. Hence, it would be a very bad idea literally to send police into bedrooms to hunt down those engaging in adultery, fornication, homosexual acts, and so on. Such draconian policies would do far more harm than good.

However, the immediate harm of such immoral behavior is localized, and things are very different where what is in view are policies and actions that have a tendency to undermine the stability of the family as an institution—and thus “without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained,” to borrow Aquinas’s words. Examples would include practices, like those mentioned above, that were once illegal but are now supported by the state—abortion, same-sex marriage, easy divorce, and so on. These things can and ought once again to be forbidden by law.

The same goes for pornography, which does to the moral character of individuals and societies what heroin does to bodies, and I would argue that its distribution should be punished with a severity comparable to the severity with which drug kingpins are punished. The legality of pornography is often defended, even by those who disapprove of it, in the name of free speech. But such a defense is fallacious. From a natural law perspective, the right to free speech is grounded in our nature as fallible rational animals. Because we are rational creatures, we ought as far as possible to try to persuade each other through rational argumentation rather than force, and because we are fallible we need to be open to rational criticism. Freedom of speech is thus a safeguard on the proper exercise of our intellectual powers. But pornography does not appeal to the intellect. Rather, it appeals to our passions, and has an inherent tendency to disorder them. Moreover, as Aquinas’s analysis of the “daughters of lust” implies, it does so precisely in a manner that positively *impairs* rather than facilitates our intellectual powers. Properly understood, then, the rationale for freedom of speech points if anything *away from* rather than toward a right to the use of pornography.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 96, a. 2.

Integralism and Sexual Morality

So far my discussion has appealed to considerations drawn from natural law rather than divine revelation. But two key insights from Hütter's article point to the relevance of the latter as well to what I am calling the politics of chastity. In particular, Hütter argues persuasively that in the modern world, pornography and other sins against chastity are primarily a byproduct of the vice of *acedia*. He also argues, no less persuasively, that ultimately "chastity is restored, preserved, and perfected from above," by way of grace and the theological virtue of hope.¹¹

Now, *acedia*—apathy with respect to spiritual goods, and in particular with respect to what Aquinas calls "the Divine good"¹²—is especially fostered by the two main political ideologies that have dominated the modern world, namely liberal individualism and socialism. Both put excessive emphasis on material goods, liberalism by way of fostering consumerism and socialism by way of a primarily economic conception of social justice. Both have frequently (though not always) been associated with hostility to religion. Liberalism has evinced such hostility in the name of freeing individuals from the fetters on their desires imposed by religious dogma and the political influence of the clergy. Socialism has done so in the name of breaking the power of an institution that reconciles believers to economic injustice and stands in the way of the state's efforts to rectify it. By focusing human efforts on bettering material conditions in this life and often fostering suspicion of religion, these ideologies have opened the door to the *acedia* of which Hütter speaks, to the spiritual emptiness that is its inevitable sequel, and to indulgence in sexual vice in the vain attempt to fill the void.

As it happens, though, these ideologies have also both tended to attack the family in a more direct way, and this was arguably inevitable given the individualism of the one and the collectivism of the other. Liberalism has difficulty countenancing the reality of positive obligations to others to which we never consented. Accordingly, it is difficult for liberalism to accept the idea that marriage is indissoluble, that we are duty bound to protect and provide even for "unplanned" offspring, and so on. Meanwhile, socialism has difficulty countenancing the reality of allegiances that trump any duties we have to society as a whole, especially when these allegiances pose barriers to the designs of central planners and upset favored patterns of distribution. Hence the rights of parents over the education of their children, natural sex roles that entail dependence of a mother on

¹¹ Hütter, *Bound for Beatitude*, 333, 361–62.

¹² Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 35, aa. 3–4.

a father's income, the right of children to inherit the wealth amassed by their parents, and other aspects of traditional family arrangements do not sit well with socialism. Liberalism's threat to the family derives from its insensitivity to the natural law principle of *solidarity*, and socialism's threat to the family derives from its insensitivity to the natural law principle of *subsidiarity*. If liberalism tends to dissolve the family down into its individual parts, socialism tends to absorb it up into the collectivist blob.

The political dimension of chastity thus seems clearly to require opposition to these ideologies most definitive of political modernity. But more than that, it indicates that at least ideally, a *distinctively Christian* understanding of our spiritual end ought to inform the political order. For the highest spiritual end that *acedia* distracts us from is the supernatural end of the beatific vision. And the grace that is necessary to restore us to chastity is supernatural assistance, mediated through prayer and the sacraments. While some knowledge of God and of the nature and gravity of sexual vice is available to natural reason, knowledge of the supernatural end and the assistance of grace are not. And in light of original sin, even the natural knowledge that is available in principle is in practice rarely to be found, and is admixed with grave error. Hence Christian revelation is needed for a complete understanding of the ends we must pursue in order to overcome *acedia* and sins of the flesh, and of the means to achieving those ends.

Hence the project of restoring respect for chastity at the level of Western society as a whole is not realistic unless it is concomitant with a general re-evangelization of Western society—and with the political implications of such a re-evangelization. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

The duty of offering God genuine worship concerns man both individually *and socially*. This is “the traditional Catholic teaching on the moral duty of individuals *and societies* toward the true religion and the one Church of Christ.” By constantly evangelizing men, the Church works toward enabling them “to infuse the Christian spirit *into the mentality and mores, laws and structures* of the communities in which [they] live.” The social duty of Christians is to respect and awaken in each man the love of the true and the good. It requires them to make known the worship of the one true religion which subsists in the Catholic and apostolic Church. Christians are called to be the light of the world. Thus, the Church shows forth the kingship of Christ over all creation and in particular *over human societies*. (§2105; emphasis added)

And against the idea that a state can somehow instead be neutral about the Catholic Faith—hostile to it, but not affirming it either—the *Catechism* says:

Every institution is inspired, at least implicitly, by a vision of man and his destiny, from which it derives the point of reference for its judgment, its hierarchy of values, its line of conduct. Most societies have formed their institutions in the recognition of a certain preeminence of man over things. Only the divinely revealed religion has clearly recognized man's origin and destiny in God, the Creator and Redeemer. *The Church invites political authorities to measure their judgments and decisions against this inspired truth about God and man:*

Societies not recognizing this vision or rejecting it in the name of their independence from God are brought to seek their criteria and goal in themselves or to borrow them from some ideology. Since they do not admit that one can defend an objective criterion of good and evil, they arrogate to themselves an explicit or implicit totalitarian power over man and his destiny, as history shows. (§2244; emphasis added)

It is worth emphasizing that these are post-Vatican II magisterial texts, and that they sit alongside texts in the same *Catechism* expressing Vatican II's teaching on the right to religious liberty. Clearly the *Catechism* does not regard that right as incompatible with the Church's having an influence on the state. Of course, this raises the question of *integralism*, a view which has been extremely controversial since the council, though in recent years seeing something of a revival.¹³ Now, critics of integralism are correct to point out that it is not a politically feasible program in the short term, and that historically the influence of churchmen on politics has not always been benign. But as all Thomists know, virtue is to be found in a mean between extremes. If the history of Christendom shows that abuses can arise when the Church has too great an influence on the state, the history of the West post-Christendom shows that great evil also arises when it has too little influence. What we have seen is exactly what St. Paul, in Romans 1:16–32, warns is bound to happen when grace no longer assists fallen nature—a collapse in knowledge even of the natural law, with widespread

¹³ See, e.g., Thomas Pink, "In Defense of Catholic Integralism," *Public Discourse*, August 12, 2018, and Thomas Crean and Alan Fimister, *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2020).

sexual immorality being Paul's "Exhibit A" of the phenomenon. The fact that modern Westerners typically regard this sexual depravity as "no big deal" only shows how thoroughgoing their depravity is. They no longer see it for what it is—an acid that eats away at the very institution most fundamentally necessary for our fulfillment as rational social animals, the family.

This is precisely what we should have expected on *a priori* theological grounds from the dissolution of Christendom. To believe that knowledge and practice of the natural law could survive without what the *Catechism* calls the "[infusion of] the Christian spirit into the mentality and mores, laws and structures of . . . communities" amounts to a kind of "social Pelagianism." Since human beings are by nature *social* animals, it stands to reason that grace, and its vehicle the Church, must work *through the social order*, and not merely directly on us as individuals. If in the short run we must muddle through as best we can in a hostile social order, in the long run chastity cannot be restored without the restoration of the social reign of Christ. N.V.