

How to Inherit a Kingdom: Reflections on the Situation of Catholic Political Thought*

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Prudence

In 1890, in his *Sapientiae Christianae*, Pope Leo XIII wrote: “The political prudence of the Pontiff embraces diverse and multiform things, for it is his charge not only to rule the Church, but generally so to regulate the actions of Christian citizens that these may be in apt conformity to their hope of gaining eternal salvation” (§37). The title of the encyclical means on principles of Christian practical wisdom, the truths concerning the pursuit in this life of our supernatural end. Leo was also referring to the regnative prudence of the pontifical office, directing citizens qua baptized. Even if the direction is about political morality, the prudential directives presuppose sanctifying grace and a supernatural end. In other words, such prudence is here proffered under the formality of the New Law.¹

In the concrete, directing those who have sanctifying grace to right

* Our thanks to the Institute for Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America for sponsoring the public lecture on October 6, 2022, and to Professor Émilie Tardivel and Fr. Aquinas Gilbeau, O.P., for their papers at the colloquium the next day.

¹ As Thomas teaches: “But that which is most prominent in the Law of the New Covenant and in which its power consists is the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is given through faith in Christ. And so the New Law is in the first instance the very grace of the Holy Spirit that is given to those who believe in Christ” (*Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 106, a. 1).

judgment and action regarding what belongs or does not belong to Caesar is not easily given or received. The lines and entanglements are contingent and fluid. At a consistory immediately after World War II, Pope Pius XII remarked that the triumph of democratic forms of government has at least one advantage: "The distinction between the Church and even the democratic State becomes increasingly clear."² Divine providence includes two comprehensive communities, polity and ecclesia, which differ in their respective origin and end. In the thick of events, they are not always so clear. For the better part of two millennia, ecclesial and civil governments look very much alike from an institutional and sociological point of view. They share families, languages, costumes, arts and sciences, banks, moral principles, the same contemporary media—indeed, even sharing the same laws and international protocols. More than half of the European Union countries are under at least one concordat with the Holy See. Yet when we casually speak of "Church and state," it is easy to imagine two teams in the same order of things. Even so, Pius XII acknowledged that democratic government makes clear(er) that the first subject of the polity is the *populus*, the people, whereas the first subject of the ecclesia is the Holy Spirit.

Beginning with Leo (1878–1903), pontifical prudence had to reckon with the benefits and challenges of representative governments. Whenever public responsibility is vested in the citizens, the baptized citizens bear a greater burden of distinguishing what properly belongs to the Church and to civil government. For in representative governments the citizens are not vassals or retainers of the king and his court. Therefore it falls more directly upon the people to understand the difference between Church and civil government.³

Leo understood the world he inhabited. In *Rerum Novarum* (1891), he mused, "Nothing is more useful than to look upon the world as it really is" (§18). This marks an important change in papal letters after 1789. Christian wisdom has to be communicated not merely to Catholics who are subjects but also to Catholics who are citizens: in France, Germany, Italy, Belgium,

² *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 37 (1945): 258–59: "If, on the other hand, we bear in mind the favorite thesis of democracy—a doctrine which great Christian thinkers have proclaimed in all ages—namely, that the original subject of civil power derived from God is the people (not the 'masses'), the distinction between the Church and even the democratic State becomes increasingly clear" (trans. ours).

³ See *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 10, on whether an infidel ought to head a civil government whose citizens are baptized. Thomas's answer is complicated. If we remove Thomas's sociological supposition that the baptized are vassals bound to comply with the wishes of their masters the article might have reached a different conclusion.

and so on. Thus, Leo observed in an allocution two years after *Sapientiae Christianae*: "Faith embodied in the conscience of peoples rather than restoration of medieval institutions is the way to final victory."⁴

As it turned out, Leo's greatest problem was the French Church and the Third Republic, which became more aggressively laicist with every passing decade, even though it was still under the 1801 concordat signed by Napoleon and Pius VII. For Leo, much was at stake, chiefly the law of divorce, which had been excised from the Napoleonic Code. Born in 1810, Leo had seen the historical events: the captivity of Pope Pius VII and then his release by the French, the demise of Napoleon, the loss of the papal states (the longest continuous temporal government in western Europe, until the summer of 1870), and Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*. He possessed those chief parts of prudence: memory, foresight, circumspection, and above all *caution*!

Writing to the French Church in 1892, he observed that:

Founded by Him who was, who is, and who will be forever, she has received from Him, since her very origin, all that she requires for the pursuing of her divine mission across the changeable ocean of human affairs. And, far from wishing to transform her essential constitution, she has not the power even to relinquish the conditions of true liberty and sovereign independence with which Providence has endowed her in the general interest of souls. . . . But, in regard to purely human societies, it is an oft-repeated historical fact that time, that great transformer of all things here below, operates great changes in their political institutions. (*Au Milieu des Sollicitudes* §17)

Unlike the Church founded by Christ and marriage (both of which have divinely insculped and fixed forms and ends), political order has no fixed form. God the author of nature does not guarantee the perpetuity of a particular political form, monarchical or republican. Thus, Leo counseled the French Catholics to dial down the temperature of debate about the relative merits of monarchical versus republican forms. What was at stake was a laicist crackdown that could endanger the two societies that really *are* divinely insculped: sacramental marriage and the Church. This is exactly what happened a decade later. The Republic dissolved the concordat, expelled religious orders, closed Catholic schools, and provided for civil

⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Onorare le ceneri*, March 1, 1892, Alloc.

divorce. Leonine prudence yielded a truce with Bismarck and a rollback of his *Kulturkampf*, but Leo could not direct the disputatious French.

Even *Immortale Dei* (1885), the most doctrinal encyclical on these things, is carefully worded: "Hence, civil society, established for the common welfare, should not only safeguard the well-being of the community, but have also at heart *the interests of its individual members*, in such mode as not in any way to hinder, but in every manner to render as easy as may be, the possession of that highest and unchangeable good for which all should seek. Wherefore, for this purpose, care must especially be taken to preserve unharmed and unimpeded the religion whereof the practice is the link connecting man with God" (§6; "individual members" meaning both French citizens and baptized Catholics.).

He was not asking the Third Republic to make laws about religion (the concordat was still in place), much less to direct citizens to a supernatural end, but rather "not to hinder" and to "preserve unharmed and unimpeded" the religious practices of Catholics.⁵ Leo insisted upon restoration of the *patrimonium Petri*, the so-called papal states. His protégé Pius XI once dubbed the Chilean law of separation to be an "amicable coexistence," for it allowed society to remain somewhat intact, even though it derogated from Church teachings on separation.⁶ Politics that followed the French laicist model, however, held that the state has a monopoly on human fraternity, all else being consigned to a private life. Even so, Leo and Pius not only refrained from direct criticism of republican government but indirectly supported it against elements of the Catholic right wing.

Perhaps the strangest, but most interesting, take on separation of Church and state came from Émile Ollivier, a French minister of religious affairs, on the eve of the First Vatican Council and its recognition of the universal jurisdiction of the pope. Pius IX declined to invite Catholic sovereigns to send ambassadors (*oratores*) to the Council. The secretary of state, Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, explained that there could be no principle of selection between "good" and "bad" Catholic sovereigns. Privately, he said that "Exclusively Catholic Governments had virtually ceased to exist."⁷ In France,

⁵ Nor does Leo suggest that other Christian denominations, much less non-Christian religions, be kept unharmed and unimpeded. That will be the subject of the Second Vatican Council's 1965 *Dignitatis Humanae*.

⁶ Pius XI, *Iam Annus* (1925): "Tuttavia tale provvedimento è applicato in modo così amichevole da sembrare non già una frattura ma piuttosto una convivenza amichevole."

⁷ Lord Odo Russell to Earl of C., March 7, 1870, in *The Roman Question, Extracts from the Despatches of Odo Russell from Rome, 1858–1870*, ed. Noel Blakiston (London: Chapman and Hall, 1962), 404.

Ollivier declared in the Chamber of Deputies that the pope had, in effect, introduced the separation of Church and state: "Yes, this is a new fact, a new deed indeed that the disavowance between the laical society and the religious society is put into effect by the pope's own hand."⁸ The ever mischievous ultramontane editor of *L'Univers*, Louis Veuillot, gleefully agreed—princes are now "outside the Church."⁹ It was in this light that Ollivier would make bold to say in the same speech: "Undoubtedly, Gentlemen, I know that Rome earnestly wishes to separate itself from the State, but She does not want the State to separate itself from Her." Rome never refuted that charge.

Indeed, this was exactly the intent of the Vatican I: to pull the world's bishops out of civil establishments and quasi-establishments and thus to make clear and effective the *sui generis* nature of the apostolic college, which does not belong to Caesar—no matter how friendly.¹⁰ Indeed, one-way separations can imply an establishment or restoration of proper order. When the Third Republic enacted its long set of laicist restrictions on the French Church (1880–1905), culminating in the cancellation of the concordat and the issuance of the Law of Separation (1905), the purpose was more akin to an establishment. Perhaps it was not as brutal as the Revolution's Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790), yet it did attempt to establish the diocesan clergy in a civil order.¹¹

Leonine-era "pontifical prudence" on relations between the Church and civil governments must be seen like pieces on a chessboard—the tactics constitute a very important context for how the principles are formulated and applied. It was for all practical purposes inevitable that churchmen would in due course strip out the relevant sentences representing a spectrum of prudential judgments and arrange them in lists that might prove useful for purely doctrinal canons. In the 1940s, textbooks that were used to teach clergy, religious, and lay students in universities made such lists that had the ambience of Thomistic, or at least Scholastic, propositions.

⁸ Speech in Chamber of Deputies on 10 July 10, 1868, in Émile Ollivier, *L'Église et l'état au Concile du Vatican*, 3d ed., vol. 1 (Paris: Gamier Frères, 1877), 400. This work is still the best study of the evolution of Church–state relations and Vatican I; see also 1:49–48.

⁹ Fredrik K. Nielsen, *The History of the Papacy in the XIXth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1906), 2:296.

¹⁰ On one-way separations and other important discussions on the Vatican I era, see *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism: On Law, Politics, & Human Nature*, ed. John Witte and Frank Alexander, with introduction and chapter on Leo XIII by Russell Hittinger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹¹ See Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 24–25.

Take for example Henri Grenier's three-volume work *Thomistic Philosophy*.¹² It is one of the better textbooks of that period. The author is prudently short-winded on the subject, which does not amount to more than ten pages, placed at the very end of the three volumes. In the section on Church and state, we find several prescriptions for rightly ordered relations, and all but one are contingent, needing to be read in the sense of conditional clauses, "if . . . then." He distinguishes, for example, obligations in light of (1) pagan states, not Christian, with no presupposition of baptism or sanctifying grace, which means that pagan political authority is intact under natural law, for neither sin nor grace takes away the natural avidity of human persons to form political society; (2) apostate Christian peoples, actively schismatic or rebellious Christian peoples, the conditions of which must be further delineated; (3) liberal states marked by the right of liberty of conscience or by one or another constitutional prohibition on the making of laws respecting religion.¹³ The categories can be expanded or contracted, but they could not provide a roadmap for a late late-twentieth-century student. An alert reader today will understand, at least in retrospect, why it was necessary to locate a *principium fundamentale*.¹⁴

Whoever does not have a stomach for such historical and social contingencies—not to mention reversals of fortune—on an issue of such magnitude, perhaps should not attempt to handle questions of Church and state.

In what follows we want to locate a fundamental principle that can serve as a light—not at the end of the tunnel of contingencies, but one that illuminates our path at the very beginning.

Separated by the Hand of God

A truly *first* principle is that the Kingdom of Christ is separated both in ordinary human time and eschatologically. We use the term "separate" in just the way Joseph Ratzinger does, both as scholar and pope. "Jesus had actually achieved a *separation* of the religious from the political, thereby changing the

¹² Henri Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, vol. 3, 3rd ed., Cursus Philosophiae (Charlottetown, Canada: St Dunstan's University Press, 1949), nos. 1158–71.

¹³ Which calls to mind the U.S. Constitution 6.3, which prohibits any religious test for the holding office or trust, but which never uses the word separation.

¹⁴ The freedom of the Church "is the fundamental principle [*principium fundamentale*] in what concerns the relationships between the Church and governments and the whole civil order" (*Dignitatis Humanae* §13). This is laid down in the second part of the document, *sub luce revelationis*, which concerns the eschatological framework. The moral principles based upon reason and the natural ordination to discover and hold the truth about God are developed in the first part.

world: this is what truly marks the essence of his new path. . . . This brings us back to the question of the interweaving and the separation of religion and politics. In his teaching and in his whole ministry, Jesus had inaugurated a non-political Messianic kingdom and had begun to detach these two hitherto inseparable realities from one another.”¹⁵ So, too, for Wojtyła as scholar and pope: “Christ’s entry into the world reveals an economy *altogether sui generis*, proper to God alone. It is a divine economy, with its source in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

For our purposes in this essay, separated is the equivalent of being “set aside” not only as something holy, but just as importantly something accomplished by a divine rather than a human act.¹⁷ Hence, we put to one side the usual spectrum of juridical and moral meanings of separation, which, however varied and interesting, are events attributed to human choices and decrees.

The title of our essay is “How to Inherit a Kingdom.” Christ’s teaching “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) has always proved difficult to hearers of the Word, beginning with Jesus’s own disciples prior to Pentecost. It is one thing to understand that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand (Mark 3:24) but quite another to understand two kingdoms that are not commensurate in their form, finality, or authority. While Caesar may represent and serve as a practical coadjutor of the natural law, he does not represent or govern the Church.

Take for example Augustine’s pastoral and theological challenge after Alaric’s sack of Rome (410). While St. Jerome bemoaned that the “whole world is perishing in one city,” Augustine was annoyed that so many Christians blamed the catastrophe on Christ. From time immemorial deities were expected to protect the safety and prosperity of the city. By a virtually universal custom, religion bound not so much men and women to their gods, but their gods to the public common good. So, if the Empire is now overseen by Christian emperors, *Ubi est Christus?* For weak and for recently converted Christians, the sack of 410 suggested that an incompetent deity was on duty. Just when Christians had some political grip on imperial power,

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 169–70. Ratzinger uses the German nouns *Trennung* (“separation”) and *Lösung* (“solution,” “unfastening,” “severance,” or even “a solution or resolution by decoupling”) to describe Jesus’s separation of the political from the religious, and he also uses the verbs *trennen* (“to separate”) and *lösen* (“to unfasten,” “to sever,” or “to uncouple”). These words are distinct from and stronger than *Unterschied* (“distinction”).

¹⁶ Karol Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 49.

¹⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 112, a. 1 (esp. ad. 1); *II-II*, q. 23, a. 2.

Rome itself was being shattered. Augustine understood that this complaint suggested that some of his flock had not understood Christianity.

His main homiletic theme became “How to Inherit a Kingdom.” For example, in Sermon 113A, he quotes Matthew 25, “Come blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom.” Throughout these “catastrophe” sermons,¹⁸ Augustine admonishes his flock to give heed to the teaching of the Lord and his ministers who are preparing those who hear to receive a Kingdom not of this world rather than grieve for the stones of Rome. Augustine was insistent that they learn the dominical words, “my kingdom is not of this world.” In his tracts on the Gospel of John, he restates the words of Christ before Pilate: “Listen therefore Jews and gentiles; listen, circumcision; listen uncircumcision; listen, all earthly kingdoms: I am no hindrance to your dominion in this world. . . . What more do you want? Come to the kingdom that is not of the world by believing.”¹⁹ As for those who govern the Church, Augustine admonishes them to imitate Noah, Daniel, and Job, for each symbolizes faith that the Lord God delivers the faithful from tribulation.²⁰

These sermons were swiftly reworked into book I of *De civitate Dei*. This is the sole book of the *City of God* that criticizes Christians, on grounds of both weak morals and even weaker faith. It is also worth remarking that, between Sermon 113A (September 410) and his writing of book I of *De civitate Dei* in 412, Pelagius appeared in North Africa after taking flight from his now uncomfortable habitation in Rome. Indeed, he becomes an object of the main question: How can one here below inherit the Kingdom, except by supernatural faith? This is the central question of the last decade of Augustine’s life.

In making sense of Church and world (including the political powers), separation is a first-order term because it describes what is essential to the Kingdom: being set apart, having a supernatural end as well as supernatural

¹⁸ Those who grumble, in Sermon 296, no. 9. See also Sermon 113A, nos. 81, 397.

¹⁹ St. Augustine, Sermon 115, no. 2, in *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City, 2020). Augustine worked on *Tracts on John* (*In Evangelium Ioannis*) while writing what we call his books of separation in *De civitate Dei*: 11 (angelic); 12 (human); 13–14 (body and soul); 15 (Cain and Abel); 20–22 (Noah and the rest, up to final judgment).

²⁰ St. Augustine, Sermon 397 (late 411?): “But Noah represents good leaders, who govern and direct the Church, just as Noah captained and steered the ark in the flood. Daniel, represents the holy celibates, Job represents all the married people who live good and upright lives. It is these three kinds of people, after all, that God will deliver from that tribulation” (in *Sermons 341–400*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. [New York: New City, 1995]). To put it in another way, tribulation does not contradict Christian vocation. See also *De civitate Dei* 19.27 for the development on Job.

capacities for achieving that end. More than seven centuries later, Thomas Aquinas relied heavily on Augustine's understanding of what belongs to this world in contrast to the Kingdom. Here is St Thomas on John 18: "My kingdom is not of this world, that is, does not have its origin in earthly causes and human choice."²¹

Leo XIII relies on this tradition: "It cannot be doubted, under safeguard of the faith, that the governance of souls was committed to the Church alone, in such wise that powers of the political order have no share whatever in it" (*Sapientiae Christianae* §27). As does Grenier, who contends that temporal happiness secured by rightly ordered politics is not, strictly speaking, a means to the end of eternal happiness, because no natural operation can be a part or direct means to the supernatural end. He puts it this way: "not as a *means or a part*, but only as a good inferior in nature to the good of a higher order." Indeed, "the Church does not embrace all other societies as its parts—civil society is not a part of the Church."²² Such is true even when Christians are members of the civil community. So far forth, they bring with them a wisdom about moral precepts and virtues that are common to human life. In due course, we will examine this distinction between morals and eschatology.

Grenier makes a critical point. We never say that the *civitas*, polis, or imperium is separate from the families and associations that compose it. Rather, we affirm that the government is distinguished but not separated from the component parts—the living stones so to speak. For common sense, we say that, when some thing or group is integral, we affirm that its elements can be distinguished (even qualitatively) but not separated. The Kingdom in pilgrimage, however, does not consist of other societies as integral parts.²³

It is difficult *not* to think of the Church as the highest region of a single differentiated society—perhaps as an international one for the progressives, and often a national one for conservatives.²⁴ This is understandable, but

²¹ *In Evangelium Ioannis*, tract. 18, no. 2352.

²² Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1165.

²³ Except for one, namely marriage, which (bearing in mind Matt 22:20) for the baptized is a sacrament that includes all the natural elements of matrimony. This is why the contest between temporal regimes and the Church will always come back around to marriage. See Russell Hittinger, "Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI," in *Christianity and Family Law: An Introduction*, ed. Gary S. Hauk and John Witte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 323–43.

²⁴ For modern progressives, it is difficult not to think of the Church as a lower part of a single society, in the fashion of the Social Gospel inspiring but not determining the unfolding of history. On these issues, Ratzinger is once again helpful. In his discussion of John the Baptist's preaching and baptizing as a preparation for Christ's teaching and mission, Ratzinger describes the differences between the Zealots, the Pharisees,

wrong. The Church here below is set aside, separated, sanctified as a sign and preparation of its full eschatological union with the resurrected Christ. Supernatural union is not a superior version of temporal and natural happiness; nor is temporal happiness an inferior version of heaven. Therefore the word “integral” is not fit for doing the work of describing the Kingdom vis-à-vis the temporal powers. To attempt to do so puts us into trouble even before we start.

Take for example Leo XIII’s remark in *Immortale Dei*: “There must, accordingly, exist between these two powers a certain orderly connection, which may be compared to the union of the soul and body in man” (§14). Of course, soul to body “in man” is a substantial form. Societies on the other hand are unities of order. In a unity of order, each member possesses what is individually proper to himself—namely, certain operations and acts not reducible to the commonality.²⁵ So Leo cannot have meant a strict analogy

the Sadducees, and the so-called Essenes. He says: (1) the Zealots “were prepared to resort to terror and violence in order to restore Israel’s freedom,” (2) the Pharisees were akin to recalcitrant conservatives who “endeavored to live with the greatest possible exactness according to the instructions of the Torah” and who “refused conformity to the hegemony of Hellenistic-Roman culture, which . . . was now threatening to force Israel’s assimilation to the pagan peoples’ way of life,” (3) the Sadducees were akin to elite liberals “most of whom belonged to the aristocracy and the priestly class” and who “attempted to practice an enlightened Judaism intellectually suited to the times, and so also to come to terms with Roman domination,” and (4) the Essenes withdrew to the Judean desert where they created “monastic-style communities, but also a religiously motivated common life for families. [They] also established a productive literary center and instituted distinctive rituals, which included liturgical ablutions and common prayers.” He says that “it appears that not only John the Baptist, but possibly Jesus and his family as well, were close to the [Essenes of the] Qumran community.” It is not a stretch to say that these four approaches to religion, culture and society, political government, and ultimately to the Messiah determine the way one sees the Church–state issue. Contra the Zealots, Ratzinger says that Jesus transformed “the ‘zeal’ that would serve God through violence . . . into the zeal of the Cross. Thus he definitively established the criterion for true zeal—the zeal of self-giving love. This zeal must become the Christian’s goal.” In the span of one chapter, Matt 22, Christ calls the Pharisees hypocrites and teaches them that they must render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and he tells the Sadducees that they “are misled because [they] do not know the scriptures or the power of God,” thus stretching their thinking into the eschatological realm, where “at the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven.” See, respectively, Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part One: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 12–14, and Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, 22.

²⁵ Thomas, *In I eth.*, lec. 5.

of substantial form. Political society does not have the “form” of the Church. This is proved by reading the next sentences:

The nature and scope of that connection can be determined only, as We have laid down, by having regard to the nature of each power, and by taking account of the relative excellence and nobleness of their purpose. One of the two has for its proximate and chief object the well-being of this mortal life; the other, the everlasting joys of heaven. Whatever, therefore in things human is of a sacred character, whatever belongs either of its own nature or by reason of the end to which it is referred, to the salvation of souls, or to the worship of God, is subject to the power and judgment of the Church. Whatever is to be ranged under the civil and political order is rightly subject to the civil authority. Jesus Christ has Himself given command that what is Caesar’s is to be rendered to Caesar, and that what belongs to God is to be rendered to God.

Clearly, Leo does not mean that the two powers are related by substantial form, nor by higher souls or archons ruling lower ones. Stoics sometimes spoke of souls of social organisms. But Leo was not a Stoic. Perhaps the *Letter to Diognetus* exhibits at least a trace of Stoic rhetoric when it declares: “What the soul is to the body, Christians are in the world.” But in that very chapter, the author insists that Christians are in the world but not *of* it.²⁶ The point that the apologist intends is very much like St. Thomas’s note: “Again, in order to dispose our affections, the Gospel contains things which involve that hatred of the world through which a man comes to have a capacity for the grace of the Holy Spirit. For as John 14:17 says, ‘The world [read: lovers of the world] cannot take in [*capere*] the Holy Spirit.’”²⁷

That his Kingdom is not of this world is a dominical saying of supreme importance. Jesus’s disciples vehemently resisted this teaching until Pentecost;

²⁶ *Letter to Diognetus* 6. Even more strongly, Christians “cannot be identified with the world.” Perhaps Leo’s soul to body is a metaphor, a meaning carried over to some other thing. The soul’s nobility is not diminished by the fact that it is not a bodily part. So too the Church’s domain is not limited by saying that it is not a part of the civil jurisdiction. It can inspire and move the members of the body politic without being a “part” in the jurisdictional sense. It is a metaphorical stretch, but see Henri de Lubac, “The Authority of the Church in Temporal Matters,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 211. For a more critical interpretation of *Immortale Dei* §14, see J. C. Murray, S.J., “Leo XIII on Separation of Church and State,” *Theological Studies* 14, no. 2 (1953): 209–10.

²⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 106, a. 1, ad 1.

over the course of Church history, many of their successors and our own brethren have been unnerved by the teaching. Ratzinger explains that, “for a long time now, Christians have tended to avoid quoting” the numerous New Testament texts that express the conviction that “our commonwealth is in heaven” (Phil 3:20) and that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb 13:14). He says that, especially in the twentieth century, many Christians have neglected this fundamental theme because they have made the mistake of thinking that these texts “appear to alienate man from the earth and prevent him from fulfilling his innerworldly task, which is also a political task.”²⁸ If polity is natural and God-given, why should political authority not be a coadjutor of the Kingdom?

The recurrent, perennial position (again, post-peccatum in real historical time) is pagan integralism, which flows in part from the natural human desire for immortality run amok after sin—a distorted expression of the natural desire for immortality.²⁹ The highest *practical* expression of the desire for immortality is to participate in political life.³⁰ It outlasts the individual, the family, and the tribe. Normal people will grieve the loss of their political society more than even the loss of their own lives. But the temporal regime of political order neither conquers death nor causes resurrection, the truly eschatological premises of the Kingdom. It was Christ who had to achieve the separation as a dimension of his overcoming of sin and its effects. We can even say that, if the higher life does not achieve separation by transcending the political, its activities are not being done badly; rather, they are not being done at all.

Let us sharpen a distinction embedded in the word “separation.” First,

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Selected Writings: Faith and Politics*, with a Foreword by Pope Francis, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 148–50. See also Augustine, *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 15.35: “Because it is not so much when the Church is involved in so many evils, or amidst such offenses, and in so great a mixture of very evil men, and amidst the heavy reproaches of the ungodly, that we ought to say that it is glorious, because kings serve it—a fact which only produces a more perilous and a sorer temptation” (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 5 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004], 172).

²⁹ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 60–66. See also Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 1, where he shows that the political virtues of the Romans mask the fear of death. For a brilliant discussion of counterfeit (political) virtues masking the fear of death, see Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36–49.

³⁰ See Plato, *Symposium* 207a–12c, and Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 29.

it can mean *contradictory*, or separate can be *contrary*. For example: the reign of sin and death is contradictory to the Kingdom even below, and the Church must be separated from it. But we can say that political life, just as such, is a good thing—not inherently sinful or death-dealing—but even so is *contrary* to (*other than*) the Kingdom. As Henri de Lubac helpfully puts it: “Temporal and spiritual power are not opposed as two contradictories.”³¹ This distinction between separation as signifying otherness and as signifying contradiction is propounded by Cardinal Wojtyła in his 1976 Lenten conferences for Pope Paul VI, published in 1979 as *Sign of Contradiction*.

Commenting on the presentation in the temple, where Simeon prophecies that the child will be a sign of contradiction (Luke 2:28–35), Cardinal Wojtyła prays that the light of Christ will “give us strength and make us capable of accepting and loving the whole truth about Christ, *of loving it all the more as the world all the more contradicts it*.” On the other hand, “Christ’s entry into the world reveals an economy *altogether sui generis, proper to God alone. It is a divine economy, with its source in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*.”³² Both senses of separation are distinguished without confusion. Christ initiates a *sui generis* economy that belongs to God alone, and he is a sign of contradiction.³³

Paradoxically perhaps, if Christians are to fecundate the world, it cannot come by being united to the state, nor by becoming one with the reign of sin and death. Rather, the Church must achieve both kinds of separation as fully as possible. Separate from what is contradictory and separate from what is contrary. Along the lines of the merely contrary, Jesus says that there is no marriage or family in heaven (Matt 22:30). The mode of human fellowship in heaven does not include natural procreation and family. It is not contradictory, only *sui generis*.

Politics, to the contrary, has its foundational principles in morals under natural law, custom, and various species of human law. The capacities and actions deployed to secure this order are connatural to human beings even if a proper political order is difficult to achieve, and even more difficult to maintain. In sharp distinction, however, no person can direct another to the Kingdom without presupposing grace. Sacramentally, this means baptism, but more generally it means sanctifying grace.

³¹ De Lubac, “Authority of the Church,” 205.

³² Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction*, 8 and 49.

³³ See Pope Benedict XVI on Wojtyła’s Lenten conferences, emphasizing the meanings of contradiction (Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005).

Ratzinger on Morals and Eschatology

On these and other related questions, we propose that the most important Catholic thinker of the twentieth century is Joseph Ratzinger, both as bishop-cardinal and as pope. Perhaps the most neglected theological treatise within the memory of our generation is his work *Eschatology*.

Ratzinger treats the fundamental distinction between morals by nature and the formal, efficient and the final causes of initiation into the Kingdom—properly understood as eschatology. First, the Church imitates Christ, who himself taught the rudiments of the moral law and virtue. Such teaching is given to all the nations. But the Kingdom, which is the locus of eschatology, is not an institution or association in the familiar sociological sense. The Kingdom is the Person of Christ, and its inhabitants are those who draw close to him by grace. It is not a sphere within other spheres, but an event.³⁴ “The message of the Kingdom of God has something very important to say to politics. It is healthy for politics to learn that its own content is not eschatological. The setting asunder of eschatology and politics is one of the fundamental tasks of Christian theology.”³⁵

Why call this an eschatological distinction? The true *Basileus* (the temple, the *regnum*,) is Christ, who is properly called *autobasilea* (self-ruling).³⁶ For, when Christians are moved by the Holy Spirit to make that act of faith, it is truly an eschatological event.³⁷ This is the sign of Jonah, for Christ’s teaching converges upon himself “as the ‘now’ of God.”³⁸ Faith moves the soul to participate in an eschatological celebration that unites us to Christ and his Church. The Church is, as we have said, properly *sui generis*. Yet, if we are forced to speak very loosely of the “genus” of the Church as a graced, supernatural society in which we participate by faith, then we do well to follow

³⁴ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 35.

³⁵ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 59. Elsewhere he says that “by merging with the state, the Church would destroy both the essence of the state and her own essence. The Church remains something ‘outside’ the state, for only thus can both Church and state be what they are meant to be. Like the state, the Church too must remain in her own proper place and within her boundaries. She must respect her own being and her own freedom, precisely in order to perform for the state the service that the latter requires.” He adds that it is precisely the eschatological premise, or “‘eschatological’ attitude that guarantees the state its own right while simultaneously resisting absolutism by indicating the boundaries both of the state and of the Church in the world.” See Ratzinger, *Selected Writings: Faith and Politics*, 148–50.

³⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part One*, 49.

³⁷ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 35.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 32.

Fr. Benoît-Dominique de la Soujeole, O.P., who says that the “sacramentality of the Church . . . gives us, as it were, the genus to which the Church belongs.” He repeats this point: “To say that the Church is a sacrament is to specify, as it were, the larger ‘genus’ to which she belongs.” Clearly, Fr. de la Soujeole is using “genus” in a quite extended sense, but understanding the Church as a sacrament, or as sacramental, enables us to see that, when we are united to her, we are set apart so as to be taken up into an efficacious sign of God’s presence in but not of the world.³⁹

At the trial, however, Pilate assumed that Jesus was representing something other than himself, just as Pilate represents Caesar. Pilate was confounded.⁴⁰ To Pilate, he says, “I am the truth.” In other words, I am not a threat to your political rule. I am not raising up an army against which you will have to fight, nor am I delivering a message *from* someone else, or *about* someone else, as do the prophets. I am neither Barabbas nor John the Baptist. This is eschatological. The completion is now, standing before you. Yet Jesus does

³⁹ This point is beautifully summarized in Vatican II’s 1963 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §§8–14. For the texts cited, see Fr. Benoît-Dominique de la Soujeole, O.P., *Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 451, 468. One could argue that sacramental incorporation into Christ’s Mystical Body includes our supernatural participation in the metaphysical reality that God is radically separate from the world that he creates. It is precisely his infinite transcendence that “allows” God to be present to his creatures in a creative, noncompetitive, and fecundating way without alteration or augmentation on his part. God and the world do not form an integral whole, nor do the Church and the state. See Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryrmeneias* I, lec. 14, no. 20–22; *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1; q. 105, a. 5.

⁴⁰ Augustine and Thomas alike are intrigued by Peter’s use of the temporal sword in the garden. The servant of the high priest is named Malchus, “king” or “about to reign,” according to Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis*, tract. 112, no. 5. The healing of Malchus’s ear is in anticipation of the salvation of the cup that Christ will drink. Thomas emphasizes that Peter and the other disciples were not yet confirmed in their faith (*Super Ioan* 18, lec. 2, no. 2289). While Peter’s act could be justified as a protection of the innocent (a moral justification), the situation was yet another test of the disciples’ ability to live the evangelical life, such as when Christ sent them forth with no purse or bag or sandals (Luke 22:35). They have yet to learn that the Kingdom does not make use of the material sword. On this point, Ratzinger says, “This temptation to use power to secure the faith has arisen again and again in varied forms throughout the centuries, and again and again faith has risked being suffocated in the embrace of power. The struggle for the freedom of the Church, the struggle to avoid identifying Jesus’ Kingdom with any political structure, is one that has to be fought century after century. For the fusion of faith and political power always comes at a price: faith becomes the servant of power and must bend to its criteria” (*Jesus of Nazareth, Part One*, 39–40; see also *Selected Writings: Faith and Politics*, 200–202).

not impeach Pilate's authority, not even the juridical power in capital cases.⁴¹ Although he has moral worries about the charges made against Jesus, Pilate is entirely clueless about the role of dying in the Kingdom. Jesus tells his apostles to take up their cross and follow him, but not even they understood until their faith was confirmed by the Holy Spirit. But Jesus does not tell Pilate to pick up his cross. It is not essential to the role of a political governor to die, whereas it is an act intrinsic to the Christoform order of the New Covenant (Matt 16:24–26).⁴²

On this point, Pope Benedict observes:

The transformation of human nature, and the world with it, is possible only as a miracle of grace. Where it is regarded as being, rather, the building-site where the house of politics is under construction, a rank impossibility is taken as the foundation for all human reality. . . . *The Kingdom of God is not a political norm of political activity, but it is a moral norm of that activity.* . . . In other words, the message of the Kingdom of God is significant for political life not by way of eschatology but by way of political ethics.⁴³

Ratzinger stresses that “this separation—essential to Jesus’ message—of politics from faith, of God’s people from politics, was ultimately possible only through the Cross. Only through the total loss of all external power, through the radical stripping away that led to the Cross, could this new world come into being. Only through faith in the Crucified One, in him who was robbed of all worldly power and thereby exalted, does the new community arise, the new manner of God’s dominion in the world.”⁴⁴ Imitating Christ in his

⁴¹ See David Lloyd Dusenbury, *The Innocence of Pontius Pilate: How the Roman Trial of Jesus Shaped History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), esp. ch. 13 (“I Obstruct Not Your Dominion”). See also Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, 183–202.

⁴² For the eschatological and political implications of martyrdom, see Erik Peterson’s essay “Witness to Truth,” in *Theological Tractates*, ed. and trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 151–81.

⁴³ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 59. For a very sharp warning that the political must not be confused with the Kingdom, see Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991) §25: “What Sacred Scripture teaches us about the prospects of the Kingdom of God is not without consequences for the life of temporal societies, which, as the adjective indicates, belong to the realm of time, with all that this implies of imperfection and impermanence. The Kingdom of God, being in the world without being of the world, throws light on the order of human society, while the power of grace penetrates that order and gives it life.” See also §§47 and 55.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, 170–71.

love unto the Cross and his proclamation of truth leading to a nonpolitical messianic Kingdom will “enable us to situate the temporal order in relation to a transcendent order which gives the temporal order its true measure but without taking away its own nature,” and thus the Church “can maintain firmly both the unity and the distinction between evangelization and human promotion It is thus by pursuing her own finality that the Church sheds the light of the Gospel on earthly realities in order that human beings may be healed of their miseries and raised in dignity.”⁴⁵

He adds: “Nevertheless, we must not be too hasty in condemning the ‘purely political’ outlook of [Jesus’s] opponents. For in the world they inhabited, the two spheres—political and religious—were inseparable. The ‘purely’ political existed no more than the ‘purely’ religious.”⁴⁶ Before Christ, integralism has a place in human history insofar as men and women do not understand the radically new Kingdom.

Avatars

Last year marked the fiftieth anniversary of Étienne Gilson’s Louvain lectures, which were published under the title *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*.⁴⁷ His main theme is the problem of achieving a universal human society. He explores the problem through the thoughts of seven Christian, or at least Christian-inspired, thinkers.⁴⁸ On this occasion, our interests will be given to Gilson’s understanding of eschatology.

Let us set the scene. Gilson was addressing the political and ecclesial leaders in the West in the early 1950s. A *kairos*, a new moment had been declared for the terrene city in both its domestic and international tasks. These included: Decolonization, rebuilding of western Europe, the founding of the United Nations and the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, nuclear disarmament, and of course the readjustment of the Church’s evangelical mission. There were two decades of optimism, which subsided rather quickly by the late 1960s. Gilson set out to challenge

⁴⁵ See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, approved by Pope John Paul II and signed by Prefect Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Secretary Alberto Bovone (1986), §§62 and 65.

⁴⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, 169.

⁴⁷ Étienne Gilson, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*, trans. James G. Colbert (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

⁴⁸ Roger Bacon, Dante, Nicholas of Cusa, Tomaso Campanella, Abbe of Saint Pierre, Leiniz, August Comte. We will not treat any of these chapters, for we are narrowly interested in Gilson’s eschatology, which is in chs. 1, 2, and 10.

this moment. These lectures are a tenacious and lucid identification of the principles that we have already marked in this essay.

His thesis and conclusion can be considered in this arresting thought:

If a lesson emerges about the history of the City of God and the avatars it has assumed during the course of centuries, it is, first of all, that it cannot be metamorphosized. . . . What is common to these attempts is the substitution of a human bond for the bond of faith. . . . This occurs in the hope that [some] human bond will be universalized more easily than faith.⁴⁹

In a 1933 lecture to students at St. Michael's College (Toronto), Gilson summarized this very dilemma at work in *Action Française*. "These men will keep the Church even though they are at heart pagans. The state cannot live without the Church. . . . Consequently they will stick to the Church as a political means of keeping their own country alive." Just as we pointed out earlier in connection with Ratzinger, Gilson insists that the Church cannot help a society unless it is actually the Church—"that is an entity which in no way can be subordinated to the French State."⁵⁰ Elsewhere, Gilson notes that this line of thinking is common among those who are "deeply interested in Rome but not in Jerusalem." In making this point, Gilson brings us back around to Augustine's admonition of his flock after 410. How does the Church assist the state? She can do so by teaching and living according to the principles of the moral order. Yet even these principles reflect a natural wisdom that is higher than political order. This in itself is a reminder of what is wrong with *politique d'abord*. Without its eschatology, the Church is not truly itself.⁵¹

There is no other way to know and to have the Kingdom except to participate by faith. On this score, in *Metamorphoses*, Gilson cites Thomas Aquinas:

The Divine Wisdom, that knows all things most fully, has deigned to reveal these her secrets to men, and in proof of them has displayed

⁴⁹ Gilson, *Metamorphoses*, 227.

⁵⁰ Florian Michel, *Étienne Gilson, une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: Vrin, 2018), 115n3.

⁵¹ Gilson calls this fusion of politics and the Kingdom a "doctrinal teratology"—combining two things that create a "monster," the opposite of what is integral. See Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cecile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), 58–59. See Florian Michel's discussion of *tératologie doctrinale* in ch. 2 of *Étienne Gilson*, esp. at 115–17.

works beyond the competence of all natural powers, in the wonderful cure of diseases, in the raising of the dead, and what is more wonderful still, in such inspiration of human minds as that simple and ignorant persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Ghost, have gained in an instant the height of wisdom and eloquence. By force of the aforesaid proof, without violence of arms, without promise of pleasures, and, most wonderful thing of all, in the midst of the violence of persecutors, a countless multitude, not only of the uneducated but of the wisest men, flocked to the Christian faith, wherein doctrines are preached that transcend all human understanding, pleasures of sense are restrained, and a contempt is taught of all worldly possessions. That mortal minds should assent to such teaching is the greatest of miracles [*maximum miraculum*], and a manifest work of divine inspiration leading men to despise the visible and desire only invisible goods.⁵²

Gilson remarks that faith is not naturally transmittable by simple rational demonstration, but rather stems from “consent in which the will takes a part, and this is precisely why the problem is posed of finding how to universalize it.”⁵³ The supernatural virtue of faith is the Holy Spirit moving the will to move the intellect. It is not so much a search as it is an adherence to the divine Word. The Kingdom begins in creatures by the adherence to Christ. It is already eschatological. In this sense we should use the term “integral.” The human and divine share a life. It is the greatest of miracles. Distinguished, but inseparable in Christ.

The “avatars” of Christendom, Gilson continues, substitute for the theological virtues an intramundane task or mission, what Ratzinger calls “building a better world work site.” This task comes under morals, the human participation in the eternal law, the fundamentals of which are shared by all human beings. But, as Ratzinger suggests, “the entire confession of faith” is brought under the “single theme of hope.”⁵⁴ Shorn of the “eschatological attitude” flowing from grace, we are left with a Social Gospel that waits upon the evolution of history without the adherence of supernatural faith and remains unmindful of what Gilson calls “the shadow of the Cross.”⁵⁵

We will let Chantal Delsol have the last word. “In its pretention to establish itself as a civilization, Christianity ended up producing a monstrous avatar that is at the same time its alter-ego and its mortal enemy.” We take

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 6.

⁵³ Gilson, *Metamorphoses*, 220.

⁵⁴ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 59.

⁵⁵ Gilson, *Metamorphoses*, 235.

her to be saying this: When the Christian Church sloughs off faith, it lets loose phony eschatologies in the world, avatars; but what is worse is that the Church herself becomes an avatar of the temporal powers.⁵⁶ And thus separation in the proper theological sense is regarded as an evil. And it would be, if we were talking only about social things: marriage and family, polity, international order.

In this essay, however, we are talking about how to inherit a Kingdom. Here, being set apart is the beginning of wisdom. N.V.

⁵⁶ Chantal Delsol, *La fin de la Chrétienté* (Paris: Cerf, 2021), 149–50.