



Virtue Corner: The Political Community

We continue our exploration in 2022 of the Catholic Church's social doctrine. After covering the principles of social doctrine, we are now focusing on the areas in which those principles apply. We looked at the family and then, last month, on human work and the economy. This month we will consider the political community. Then, to conclude the social doctrine series next month, we will examine the pursuit of social peace.

a. What is the Political Community?

Our English words "political" and "politics" come "from Greek *"politikos"* ("of citizens, pertaining to the state and its administration; pertaining to public life) as well as "from *"polites"* ("citizen"), and from *"polis"* ("city")."¹ The eighth chapter of the Compendium of Social Doctrine deals with political realities, i.e., how a society is administered or run. This chapter elucidates principles undergirding the political authority invested in the State, as well as guidelines for its exercise.

b. The State's Fundamental Purpose: The Common Good

The fundamental purpose of the State is "for attaining the common good," a pursuit in collaboration with all individuals and groups of society.² The common good pursued is simply "the sum total of social conditions which allow people... as groups or... individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily."³ It is "the social and community dimension of the moral good."⁴ To be authentic, an individual's fulfillment must be integral, which takes into account his or her material, cultural, moral, and spiritual dimensions.⁵ Therefore, all considerations of the common good must ultimately consider our transcendent dimension.⁶ Efforts to pursue our good on a purely naturalistic or materialistic plane would not only be insufficient, but detrimental to our well-being.⁷

Already seen in previous Circle discussions, the principles of subsidiarity and participation are foundational as two of the State's guiding principles. They hold that everyone has something to contribute to the common good, that smaller groups sometimes need the assistance of larger ones, including the State, but without the larger groups usurping the legitimate autonomy and initiative of the smaller ones.⁸ Therefore, the State is to "harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirements of justice."⁹

The State and all members of society should strive to create certain concrete social conditions which make achieving the common good more likely. Some of those include:

"above all the commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom."¹⁰

c. The Citizen's Responsibilities Towards the State

How is the Catholic citizen supposed to relate to the State? If the State has the responsibility to work for the common good, then it is the responsibility of the citizen to obey legitimate authority, since it "responds to the order established by God."¹¹ Authority in human institutions has a certain divine blessing:

"Since God made men social by nature, and since no society can hold together unless some one be over all, directing all to strive earnestly for the common good, every civilized community must have a ruling authority, and this authority, no less than society itself, has its source in nature, and has, consequently, God for its author."¹²

Therefore St. Peter can exhort "Christians to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Pet 2:13)."¹³ Additionally, a citizen should pray for rulers, and actively participate in public life.¹⁴

This obedience to the State is not a divine endorsement for a ruler to do whatever he or she wants. The obedience a Catholic is asked to give is "for the sake of conscience."¹⁵ This means that in all his or her endeavors, a Catholic is seeking to pursue the common good, and ultimately the moral good. Inasmuch as the State upholds such goods – and only to that degree – must the citizen obey the State.

"Political authority... must always be exercised within the limits of morality and on behalf of the dynamically conceived common good... When such is the case citizens are conscience-bound to obey."¹⁶

When authority oversteps such boundaries, the citizen has an obligation to resist or to seek change.¹⁷ This is why, when unjustly prohibited by the Sanhedrin to preach the Gospel, St. Peter and St. John could respond: "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4: 19-20). The Catholic Church defends the right to conscientious objection.¹⁸

This underlying "veto" of the citizenry of the ruler's power over them is possible, because while God remains the ultimate source of authority, the sovereignty within a society resides in the people as a whole.¹⁹

"In various forms, this people transfers the exercise of sovereignty to those whom it freely elects as its representatives, but it preserves the prerogative to assert this sovereignty in evaluating the work of those charged with governing and also in replacing them when they do not fulfil their functions satisfactorily."²⁰

d. Democracy

The Church recognizes more than one possible form of government : "The diversity of political regimes is morally acceptable, provided they serve the legitimate good of the communities that adopt them."²¹ Nevertheless, the above-mentioned sovereignty of the people to assess and replace its leaders finds its "fullest application" in a "democratic form of government."²² This is "due to its procedures for verification."²³

Democratic forms and structures alone are not sufficient to guarantee a healthy and thriving democracy. First, those forms and systems must be rooted in the "basic principles of the moral law."²⁴ Disconnected from such a foundation, "the legal structure of the State itself would be... reduced to nothing more than a mechanism for the pragmatic regulation of different and opposing interests."²⁵ Secondly, both the leaders and the citizens must be virtuous and live according to such moral principles for democracy to succeed. Fr. Richard Neuhaus, founder of the magazine *First Things* often wrote on this necessity. To have a good society, you need good men and women. Changing structures may be necessary to improve a society, but "[authentic] social changes are effective and lasting only to the extent that they are based on resolute changes in personal conduct."²⁶

e. When a Change is Needed

While there will never be a moment in which any given State or society is so perfectly ordered that it could not be improved, what is to be done when the need to make a change to the State or society becomes urgent? If it has clearly overstepped the boundaries of the common good and morality, how should Catholics go about constructively changing ‘the system’? ²⁷ We will highlight three points: 1) participation, 2) resistance – peaceably or armed, and, 3) education and information.

1. Participation

Problems can be more readily avoided or fixed when people are responsibly involved. Active participation in community remains “not only one of the greatest aspirations of the citizen... but is also one of the pillars of all democratic orders and one of the major guarantees of the permanence of the democratic system.”²⁸ This requires that members of the civil community at every level “be informed, listened to and involved.”²⁹ While there are legitimately varying degrees of involvement, self-governance is a right that implies the duty of active participation. As President John F. Kennedy famously said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”³⁰

2. Resistance

When the State seeks to force its citizens “to cooperate in morally evil acts they must refuse.”³¹ “No one can escape the moral responsibility for actions taken, and all will be judged by God himself based on this responsibility.”³² For this reason, a citizen’s right to conscientious objection should be respected by the State and society.³³ Since the natural law both justifies and limits positive law, when a State consistently violates it, people may legitimately resist.³⁴

“Resistance to authority is meant to attest to the validity of a different way of looking at things, whether the intent is to achieve partial change, for example, modifying certain laws, or to fight for a radical change in the situation.”³⁵

The Church has a long history of peacefully organizing and protesting against grave moral injustices, such as the Velvet Revolution of the Soviet dominated countries in the late 1980s, and the March for Life in Washington DC for the last several decades. However, peaceful resistance can even arrive at the ultimate sacrifice.

“When human authority goes beyond the limits willed by God, it makes itself a deity and demands absolute submission; it becomes the Beast of the Apocalypse... Before such a power, Saint John suggests the resistance of the martyrs; in this way, believers bear witness that corrupt and satanic power is defeated, because it no longer has any authority over them.”³⁶

Is armed resistance permitted? Yes, as a last resort, but with very stringent conditions, akin to the just war theory.

“‘Armed resistance to oppression by political authority is not legitimate, unless all the following conditions are met: 1) there is certain, grave and prolonged violation of fundamental rights, 2) all other means of redress have been exhausted, 3) such resistance will not provoke worse disorders, 4) there is well-founded hope of success; and 5) it is impossible reasonably to foresee any better solution.’ Recourse to arms is seen as an extreme remedy for putting an end to a ‘manifest, long-standing tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country.’ The gravity of the danger that recourse... [to] violence entails today makes it preferable in any case that passive resistance be

practiced, which is ‘a way more conformable to moral principles and having no less prospects for success.’”³⁷

3. Education & Information

While less immediate than other actions, it bears mentioning at least two more means of change. The Church has always recognized the importance of education and information in renewing a society.³⁸ The founding and running of schools and the use of media has long been an integral part of the Church’s evangelization process. To inform and to form the moral conscience of a population is one of the most fruitful contributions the Church and its members can make to democracy or to any political system.³⁹

f. Politics – A Noble Vocation

To conclude, we affirm that while every aspect of the human experience is touched by sin, politics – lived in the spirit of service – can be a noble vocation.

“It belongs to the layman... to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live... Those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics, or whose talents in this matter can be developed, should prepare themselves for it, and forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity.”⁴⁰

Scripture

They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to him to ensnare him in his speech. They came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion. You do not regard a person’s status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not pay?” Knowing their hypocrisy he said to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius to look at.” They brought one to him and he said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” They replied to him, “Caesar’s.” So Jesus said to them, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” They were utterly amazed at him.

Mark 12:13-17

So they called them back and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John, however, said to them in reply, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.” After threatening them further, they released them, finding no way to punish them, on account of the people who were all praising God for what had happened.

Acts 4:18-21

Questions for Discussion

1. How do you concretely give God his due in relation to politics and economics? What does he want?
2. How would you describe Christ’s fundamental attitude towards politics? How should we try to imitate it?
3. How would laypeople called to work in politics imitate Christ?
4. How do you continue to love political leaders you may be called to practically, and peaceably, resist?

5. When could a Catholic politician viably negotiate on legislation dealing with basic moral issues? Is any compromise allowed? [See the 2nd 'Inspiring Quote' after attempting an answer].

Inspiring Quotes

"The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good-will. Pope St. Clement of Rome provides the Church's most ancient prayer for political authorities:

'Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, concord, and stability, so that they may exercise without offense the sovereignty that you have given them. Master, heavenly King of the ages, you give glory, honor, and power over the things of earth to the sons of men. Direct, Lord, their counsel, following what is pleasing and acceptable in your sight, so that by exercising with devotion and in peace and gentleness the power that you have given to them, they may find favor with you.'"

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1900

"A particular problem of conscience can arise in cases where a legislative vote would be decisive for the passage of a more restrictive law, aimed at limiting the number of authorized abortions, in place of a more permissive law already passed or ready to be voted on. Such cases are not infrequent... when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects."

Evangelium Vitae, St. John Paul II, n. 73

Case Study

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Solzhenitsyn was born into a religious family in 1918, but since his father died shortly before he was born, he was raised by his mother and aunt. His aunt had a very good library and Solzhenitsyn became a prolific reader, reading both Russian and foreign classics.

His early access to Christianity and thoughts outside of Communism remained with him, but he nevertheless became a convinced Communist. He entered into a civil marriage at a very young age. He was eventually pulled into military service during World War II and received several medals. Nevertheless, his careless criticism of Stalin in written letters got him sent to the prison system for 10 years.

In prison he not only survived cancer and became disillusioned with Communism, but he turned to the Orthodox Christian faith. He saw the great value of suffering to enrich the human spirit.

He was a prolific and gifted writer and felt the need to tell the story of the prison camps. His first publication, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was given permission to be published by Khrushchev himself – in his own anti-Stalinist efforts. Solzhenitsyn became nationally famous, but the support of the government was short lived.

Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn continued to write and to speak out. His most notable works were fictional stories relating life from the prison system, such as *First Circle*. His most famous work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1973, is a three-volume non-fiction documentation of many of the atrocities in the gulag (the Soviet forced labor camps).⁴¹

Throughout his adult life, he was under constant pressure from the government. Nevertheless, he continued to speak out and have his works published outside of the Soviet Union, which returned pressure on the government. His house was raided more than once. The KGB even poisoned him, but he miraculously survived. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1970, but couldn't receive it in person, because he was afraid that he wouldn't be allowed to return. However, not too long after the publication of the *Archipelago Gulag*, he had to leave Russia.⁴²

He was exiled from his homeland and lived first in Germany, then Switzerland and finally in the United States, mostly in Vermont – with his second wife, Natalya, and their three sons.⁴³ While he admired the locally strong democracy of Switzerland, he wasn't averse to criticizing the materialism of the West. He was able to return to Russia eventually, not too long after the fall of Communism.

Joseph Pearce, Solzhenitsyn's English biographer, favorably compares him to Winston Smith, the character in Orwell's classic *1984*. Unlike Smith, Solzhenitsyn faces down the tyranny of the State. He "fought the dragon... because in conscience, he could do nothing else."⁴⁴ He fought it with his faith, the truth, and a pen.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Solzhenitsyn's vocation to write and to resist tyranny convict you of the importance of knowing and living out your own mission?
2. Many 'miraculous' interventions happened in Solzhenitsyn's life – from surviving cancer in the Soviet prison system, to converting, and to surviving an assassination attempt. Have you seen God's providential hand in your own journey?

Lumen Core Values Self-Assessment (10 minutes)

Core Values Assessment. Spend 10 minutes in silence assessing positive and negative examples of how you pursue political engagement. The below quadrant can help in jotting down some of your assessment as well as a tool for the whole Lumen Circle and how you can let it be a leaven in your life.

<p>What struck me in this circle and how I might apply it to my THINKING. What CRITICAL ISSUES am I facing? What are the biggest CHALLENGES with these issues I face and what OPPORTUNITIES does it present?</p>
<p>Prayer:</p>
<p>Family:</p>
<p>Business:</p>
<p>Lumen Action:</p>
<p><i>What ACTION STEPS can I take now or long term? Develop a concrete resolution for how you can improve in your efforts to improve your relationships with others during the next month. Your resolution should be a specific action or activity that is easily measured.</i></p>

¹ [politics | Etymology, origin and meaning of politics by etymonline](#)

² cf. CSD n. 168

³ CSD n. 164

⁴ CSD n. 164

⁵ cf. CSD nn. 168 & 165

⁶ cf. CSD n. 170

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- ⁷ cf. CSD nn. 170 & 271
- ⁸ cf. CSD 189
- ⁹ CSD n. 169
- ¹⁰ CSD n. 166
- ¹¹ cf. CSD n. 380
- ¹² CSD n. 393
- ¹³ cf. CSD n. 380
- ¹⁴ cf. CSD n. 381 & Catechism n. 1915
- ¹⁵ cf. CSD 380
- ¹⁶ CSD 394
- ¹⁷ cf. CSD 399
- ¹⁸ Cf. CSD 399, 503. Catechism n. 2242.
- ¹⁹ cf. CSD 395
- ²⁰ CSD 395
- ²¹ Catechism n. 1901.
- ²² cf. CSD 395
- ²³ cf. CSD 395
- ²⁴ cf. CSD 397
- ²⁵ CSD 397
- ²⁶ CSD 134
- ²⁷ cf. CSD 399
- ²⁸ CSD 190
- ²⁹ cf. CSD 190
- ³⁰ cf. [FACT CHECK: Did Edmund Burke Pen This Quote on The 'Triumph Of Evil'? | Check Your Fact](#)
- ³¹ CSD 399
- ³² CSD 399
- ³³ cf. CSD 399
- ³⁴ cf. 400
- ³⁵ CSD 400
- ³⁶ CSD 382
- ³⁷ CSD 400
- ³⁸ cf. CSD 191
- ³⁹ cf. Deus Caritas Est by Pope Benedict XVI, n. 28.
- ⁴⁰ CSD 531
- ⁴¹ cf. [The Gulag Archipelago - Wikipedia](#)
- ⁴² cf. [The Gulag Archipelago - Wikipedia](#)
- ⁴³ cf. [The Gulag Archipelago - Wikipedia](#)
- ⁴⁴ Joseph Pearce. [Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile](#), 378.