

THE LIBERAL, THE CONSERVATIVE, AND THE POPE

The Relation between Morality, Politics and Authority

Michael Novak

Both Catholics and non-Catholics attempt to enlist the Pope as a partisan of one or another political cause: disarmament, socialization, civil rights, aid for underdeveloped nations, the condemnation of a Hitler. The relationship between morality and politics, however, is ambiguous. Good men may well disagree about which long-range or short-range political programs are best calculated to serve man's moral interests. What, then, is the present position of the Catholic—liberal or conservative—when the Pope makes a moral-political statement about the issues of our time?

In its general lines, the traditional answer to this question is simple enough. There are three elements to distinguish: (1) moral principles; (2) political programs; (3) concrete decisions. The Pope's moral competence extends most clearly to declarations about principles. In proportion as judgments about historical facts, present trends, and the yet uncertain future are involved in political programs, the Pope's competence becomes increasingly ambiguous; his is increasingly but one of many prophetic voices "crying in the wilderness." Concerning concrete decisions, the Pope's competence almost entirely disappears; the individual Catholic must accept full responsibility for his own actions.

It is important to make this third level clearer. There is no way for a Catholic to dodge responsibility for his own concrete actions. If he accepts papal directives on levels (1) and (2) as the justification for his concrete decisions, still the concrete decision is his own. For how can he be sure he understands the enunciated principles and statements of programs, and is applying them correctly, except by the application of his own discernment and sense of responsibility? Even literal, unthinking acceptance would be a choice.

In taking action then, the duty of the Catholic is neither to hide behind the Pope's directives on levels (1) and (2) nor to dismiss those directives. Having listened to the Pope to get clear what was said and

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what was not said, the individual must decide whether the Pope's statement has relevance to the concrete matter at hand, or whether other moral principles in this case supersede it, or whether the facts in this case require that it be discounted, etc. Compared to his Protestant, Jewish, or non-believing friends, the Catholic has in the Pope simply one more source of moral guidance to consult, one more factor to account for in his final decision. Greater clarity or greater confusion in the concrete can result from a papal directive; each Catholic must face each concrete case on its own merits. Whether Pius XII, for example, had forbade service in Hitler's armies or not, no individual Catholic escaped responsibility for his own concrete decisions.

Such a view of the Pope's teaching on social and political matters has long been understood by intelligent Catholics, though a kind of "papal fundamentalism" and flight from personal responsibility has sometimes obscured it. In his new book, *Catholics and Political Freedom* (Regnery, 302 +xxii pp. \$5.95), Garry Wills seems to encounter this widely accepted view as though it were a new discovery.

What is new, however, is only that conservative Catholics have come to see it. So long as Monsignor Joseph C. Fenton and Father Francis J. Connell of the Catholic University, for example, set the tone of theological discussion in this country, the social encyclicals of the popes made almost no impact in the Catholic chancery offices, colleges, parishes, and press of this country. Socially and politically conservative Catholics did not object at that time to the "papal fundamentalism" of those who minimized personal responsibility and maximized reflex docility to the *status quo*. At that time, "liberal" Catholics like Edward Marciniak in Chicago, John Cort in Boston, Donald McDonald in Davenport, Iowa, and others bore the brunt of the struggle to make the papal call to conscience heard and reflected upon.

Non-Catholics scarcely realize the impotence of papal authority or, rather, its healthy dependence upon individual consciences. Al Smith in 1928 confessed that he did not even know what these encyclicals were that he was being clobbered with.

Communists in New York in the early 1930's used to read sections of *Quadragesimo Anno* from their soapboxes, and defy Catholics in the crowd to say that they had ever heard its principles voiced in church. Not until the mid-1950's did the social encyclicals become widely discussed among American Catholics, sixty and twenty years after their appearance.

Those who bore the brunt of that struggle to make the encyclicals known remember well the rationalizations of the conservative Catholic establishment: (1) either silence (as Wills himself testified), because the encyclicals were neither read nor studied nor preached; (2) or the protest that these encyclicals "applied to Europe, but not the United States."

The men who came to be known, for their efforts, as "liberal Catholics," or as "*Commonweal* Catholics," were often treated to scorn and suspicion by the Catholic establishment. But in the early 1950's, by their energy, their grasp of the issues, and their professional skill, they began to sway the most influential parts of the Catholic press. They succeeded to such an extent that conservative Catholics now claim that "Catholic editor" and "liberal" are practically synonymous.

An awareness of this cycle of recent history is missing from Wills' book, which attempts in the light of immediate liberal-conservative controversies to elucidate why the papal encyclicals cannot be used in partisan politics. Now that the Catholic Church, through its "liberal popes" from Leo XIII to the present, and especially through the Second Vatican Council, has turned its back on the social and cultural order of the last three hundred years in order to address the problems of a new age, the politically and socially conservative Catholic is changing the basis of his self-justification. He used to appeal to authority. Now he must appeal to freedom from authority.

There is another point to be made about the historical context in which Mr. Wills writes. In the days of their minority, the "liberal" Catholics, whatever their failings, chose the rhetorical path of reflective intelligence, calm, and respect. In the days of their power, Monsignor Fenton theologically and Senator Joseph McCarthy politically stirred many Catholic rectories, chanceries and colleges with their rhetoric of bombast and ridicule. In the days of their ascendancy, conservative Catholics have still retained this tradition of flippancy, ridicule, and insult. Mr. Wills once described the technique of Monsignor Fenton as that of "overkill." In his own work, however, Mr. Wills is also unsatisfied until he has insulted his opponents.

An intelligent dialogue between men who disagree politically, socially, and theologically is seriously needed in this country. Mr. Wills' book could have been a contribution to that dialogue. Substantively, what he has to say is common ground to liberals and conservatives. Rhetorically, his book is a disservice to the classical tradition he purports to represent; it is abusive and adolescent.

This point can be enlarged to cover the promise of the *National Review*, of which Mr. Wills is a contributing editor. Just as Lionel Trilling was writing that American liberalism was in danger of perishing for want of an intelligent and articulate opponent, and just as "liberal" Catholics were rising to an ascendancy that would be crowned with the short reign of John XXIII, William F. Buckley, Jr., and his friends launched the *National Review* to oppose both the American liberal and, tangentially, the "liberal" Catholic. No periodical was so badly needed in America; none had such great promise of good for the nation; none so sadly failed to realize its possibilities.

It is not difficult, on the other hand, to sympathize with the conservative intellectual in the United States, who must cope with the pretense of the "liberal establishment" to sweet reasonableness, to a human compassion and to a pragmatism which effortlessly render liberals more moral and more realistic than conservatives. But other opponents of such liberalism, like Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain, have never had to assume the tone of voice that is so common among disgruntled conservatives.

Mr. Wills, to resume, could have made his point in a calm and moderate manner that would have won many to the inherent justice of his cause. His moral indignation at the fact that some "liberal" Catholics now abuse papal encyclicals by trying to club other Catholics into support for the U.N., disarmament, aid to underdeveloped nations, "socialization" and the rest, is wasted. A classical philosophy expects in men but a tincture of virtue. A conservative knows that power usually corrupts, all the more effectively where knowledge is believed to be virtue.

Mr. Wills begins his book by recording in detail a shocking and sickening controversy over the quip by the *National Review* at the time of one of Pope John's encyclicals: "*Mater si! Magistra nol!*" The controversy began when Father Thurston N. Davis of *America* tried to moralize with Mr. Buckley about the obedience due the Pope; Mr. Buckley responded, and others intervened. This ugly polemic degraded all who entered it; and its moral is not earth-shaking: men misuse authority.

But even when Mr. Wills makes a study of the

authority of encyclicals, in eight long chapters, he does not bring any special illumination. His one service is to gather, from hither and yon, scraps of comment upon the nature and binding force of papal letters. But the present movement of renewal in the Church is rapidly making these scraps out of date.

Mr. Wills opens one chapter by recounting the origin of the literary form of encyclicals (in 1740). He then lists the various degrees of assent which Catholics are bound to give to different kinds of statements in them. This differential of "degrees" of assent is typical of that legalization of common sense so dear to the Latin mind. Mr. Wills points out that encyclicals are not infallible, that their authority is to be decided by a study of their intrinsic claims rather than by their extrinsic character as encyclicals, and that they are not homogeneous from sentence to sentence. The arguments of Mr. Wills, however, make popular certain fruits of *Romanità* just when *aggiornamento* is revealing their inadequacy, and calling for a much more nuanced and profound study of the place of the pope in the Church.

In subsequent chapters, Mr. Wills dwells on the difference between papal directives about belief and those about action. He shows that history conditions papal statements, and that papal directives which rest upon historical judgments share in the ambiguity of those judgments. Against what he takes to be the belief of some "liberal" Catholics, he insists that Providence is not to be identified with an immanent, univocal line of progress. In this connection, he castigates the cosmic optimism of Teilhard de Chardin, in a manner that would be more just if he recognized Chardin's awareness of his own inadequacies, and those parts of Chardin's system which, if developed, go some way towards rectifying them.

In chapter five, Mr. Wills circles the field again to show how misreadings of the literary form of the encyclicals have led some "liberal" Catholics to make mere papal recommendations or allowances into directives. In the next chapter he notes that in trying to interpret the *movements and events* of his own time, a Pope can easily err when he intends to be teaching infallibly about a moral *principle*. "The Church helps shape history because it enters history," Mr. Wills writes, stressing the ambiguities of history. This is the main point, of course, of the progressive theologies which are carrying the day at the Second Vatican Council.

Mr. Wills next relies on Newman to support a basic distinction between *faith-in* and *faith that*. This distinction involves him in a polemic against theo-

logical conservatives who seem to visualize *faith (faith that)* as a matter of assent to more and more propositions, rather than as a deeper penetration into one's relationship with God.

Next, Mr. Wills points out the freedom left the individual conscience in concrete decisions, which we have called level (3). "The papal teaching puts moral law clearly in command of the discussion; it marshals expert knowledge, indicates lines of application, commands (with the varying degrees of stringency studied earlier) certain lines of action. But the commands are rarely particular." "The encyclicals are not to be used as means for Catholics to judge their fellow Catholics, or even for the Pope to judge Catholics. They are not even aimed primarily, at making it possible for a Catholic to judge problems in the modern world—but of course they are, as Wills now notes—"except as this is involved in the fulfillment of the letters' most sacred function: they equip man to judge himself, and to endure the scrutiny of the Judge of all men." We may agree that, in encyclicals, the Pope does not seek "submission to a set of formed conclusions, but the informed activity of conscience."

Part four of Mr. Wills' book, a chapter of reflections on liberty and moral law, is classically Jesuit in tone and of no particular philosophical acuity. It serves as a counterpoise, however, to rather simple statements by some philosophers of the Enlightenment.

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Mr. Wills hopes that his book will fill a gap between "the juridical niceties of theological handbooks" and the "hasty rhetoric of politics." But his own rhetoric is quite hasty. And his theology, except for what he borrows eclectically from Newman, Journet and Congar, is rather in the juridical vein. The theological depth of Vatican II, with its emphasis on cultural diversity, the collegiality of the bishops, religious liberty, the autonomy of the secular, the role of the layman both in the Church and in the world, and the dialogue with contemporary theologies, philosophies, and political programs, would have allowed his book to be much more profound. It might also have tempted him toward a little originality.

Had Mr. Wills been alert to such matters, and less intent on annihilating his opponents, he might have helped build one pillar of a seriously needed bridge of reasonable discourse between liberals and conservatives in this country. But Mr. Wills squanders the opportunity.