

A medical analogy aptly explains the laity's role in social action. The idea is that the present social order is diseased and that Christian social action is a medicine, whose effect, if God wills it, will be social health.

The disease is probably the least problematic part of this analogy. Its symptoms are the assault upon the unborn, the assault upon the sanctity of marriage, the corruption of children through public education, the extinction of individual and corporate liberties through centralized and bureaucratic government—an enormous range of social ills which collectively constitute the disease of the social order. But, the analogy goes on, there is to this disease a contrary which is called health.

Contraries, says Aristotle, are known through each other. If a man doesn't know what health is, he can't recognize a disease when he sees one; and if he has no experience of disease, he can't really appreciate health. Thus two contraries are recognized through each other.

regain his health, he needs a medicine. In the same way, a diseased social order requires a remedy; and this medicine, the analogy suggests, is Christian social action. But when we set up the problem in this way, a question arises. Is it true that the Christian order is identical to social health? Won't a just but purely natural, human order suffice? Is it even true that there is a distinctively Christian social doctrine? A very prominent Catholic layman sent me a letter some time ago (taking issue with something I had written), in which he said, Look: all this talk about Catholic social doctrine is so much stuff and nonsense. As far as I am concerned, he said, the social teaching of Christianity is reducible to two propositions: (1) My Kingdom is not of this world, and (2) Render unto Caesar All the rest of it is wishful thinking and bad economics.

Of course, the man is wrong. But there is a truth behind his error. In temporal affairs, the society of man

Liberty and Social Order

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This fact explains why the modern social disease is so little understood: people have forgotten what health is supposed to look like.

Yet it is exactly what health in the social order looks like that the popes have been trying to teach for the last century and a half in a series of brilliant and terribly controversial encyclicals. Beginning with the statements like *Mirari vos*, the condemnation of Lamennais, the founder of liberal Catholicism, then going on to the remarkably comprehensive Syllabus of Errors; and continuing with the great social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI, the popes have been trying to tell modern men that health in the social order is precisely the same as the Christian order of things. It is an order in which all things are rightly related to their ultimate end, an order in which material things are at the service of man and man is at the service of God. It is an order, then, in which men use temporal things in such a way that they attain the salvation of their souls. An order in which that hierarchy of ends obtains is the Christian order and is identical to health in the social order.

Finally, when a man has a disease and wants to

is something natural and not something revealed. The Gospel is not primarily or directly a revelation about the social order. The social order, properly considered, belongs to the order of nature. Man is by nature a being who exists in communion with other men—through the family, through voluntary associations, through public authority. Hence, the social order is a natural order. How is it, then, that a specifically Christian social order comes to be identical, in the last analysis, with social order considered in itself? Well, through a double paradox.

It happens that grace not only unites to God and saves the soul; it also perfects nature. Wherever there is the impact of grace, there is a salutary effect upon the whole man and all his dealings. Grace elevates and perfects nature: thus what is not necessary to man's being (grace) saves and perfects what is necessary to it. Divine revelation has the same effect in the order of truth. Divine revelation is able to protect the intellect through faith. In a curious way—this is the first paradox—faith, an obscure knowledge, strengthens our hold on what ought to be clear knowledge.

How is it that those truths which seem to be open to human reason on the natural plane are in fact the truths about which men have never been able to agree? Go into any public meeting or any random gathering of ten people in this country, and ask such a basic question as: Ladies and gentlemen, what is our first duty? What is man? What is society? Why are we put here? Is there a God? All these basic and crucial questions which ought to be open to unaided human reason, questions which in themselves belong to the natural order, are nevertheless surrounded by ignorance, obscured by contradiction, and finally abandoned as unanswerable in the present state of humanity. Hence we need divine Revelation and the guidance of the magisterium simply in order to hold secure and make evident to the great majority of men (especially intellectuals) those things which of themselves belong to the natural order. This indeed is what St. Thomas tells us about the need for revelation, and this need, as we are seeing, has an application in the social order.

For without the Cross, without the scandal of Christianity, the city of man comes to nothing. What Tertullian said centuries ago is still true: Christians are the least political of men. And yet without these "least political" men, the most political men make a botch of the world. This is the second paradox. Without the unpolitical Christians to tell men what their business in the world is, the whole political order goes to ruin.

This is an historically demonstrable lesson. When was there order without tyranny, diversity without pluralism? When was there any steady grip upon first principles, any virtue imposed upon the great, any peace imposed upon the nations, save in those Christian ages when the influence of the Gospel was allowed to have its full effect upon the affairs of men? Take away that effect, and the result is not the natural order standing on its own feet, proud and erect. Far from it. The result is war, ignorance and oppression.

So it is imperative that this Christian order triumph. But for the men of our time, and especially for Americans, the quest for order requires a prior solution to the question of freedom. We Americans have built around a perverted understanding of liberty the social order whose disease now causes enough pain that we are able to see the need for a medicine. It happens that a *right* understanding of liberty is the source from which the whole rationale of Catholic social action, the medicine we need, flows.

What is liberty? According to Scripture, Christ came to make us free. But then there are other men who have claimed to make us free, and there are probably few words in any language more subject to misleading definition than is this key word, liberty.

Let us look first at the conventional definition, which has prevailed for several centuries. It is a definition that

influences every aspect of public policy in the United States and, indeed, in most of the world—a definition which history marks as the core of all the movements of thought usually characterized as liberalism. The definition is this: liberty is the ability to choose between good and evil.

Now, first of all, this understanding has an application in the theological realm. It is said that man was created with a sovereign perfection that sets him apart from all other creatures. Whereas those other creatures obey God by their nature, man has to obey God by choice. Hence, the very dignity of Adam and the whole dignity of the human race consisted in the fact that this Adam could choose evil but did not (although shortly after creation he did). Every theology permeated by existentialism tells us the same thing over and over again: that the great dignity of man consists in his freedom, and that this freedom consists in the ability to reject God, the ability to choose between good and evil.

Then comes the socio-political application of this definition. If man's ability to choose between good and evil is the foundation of his dignity, then it follows that human dignity depends upon the absence of constraint. A man is the more virtuous, the more his choice is totally free. The more good and evil are perfectly balanced in his mind, the more he can as easily choose the one as the other, the more virtuous is his choice of good. Hence, in order virtuously to choose the good, men must be free of all constraints that would push them toward the good, whether they be habit, custom, family tradition or blue laws. In fact, logically, all civilization, training, education, moral restriction, all "indoctrination" of the young become suspect. And if private morals are suspect, it follows *a fortiori* that every political reform or Christian social initiative which aims to improve man's condition in the sense of making it less easy for him to choose evil is an assault on the dignity of the person. All such things are tyrannous because they interfere with that virtuous liberty whereby a man chooses the good, but always equally easily chooses the evil.

To push this doctrine further, the liberal definition of liberty discloses that all exterior authority and all exterior law is an impingement upon men's sovereign dignity as individuals. Hence, liberal man rejects all of what the philosophers call heteronomy, the law that comes from outside, and insists that all law arise in himself. He will insist that to be truly free he must choose every value, create every value, indeed, be himself the very source of good and the very criterion of good and evil. Then only is he truly autonomous, or self-governing. Of course, in this vision of things, there can be no place for authority. Authority becomes a mere ruse, an irrational thing whose only possible application is to children.

Finally, if all authority must be rejected—hence we

come to the epistemological application of this doctrine of liberty—then the last authority that liberal man is going to get rid of is the authority of truth. How dull, he says, to be held in check by the *possession* of truth! How much better, he will say, to be *seeking* truth, to be pursuing it endlessly, approximating it, guessing at it, making tentative steps. In this way, so long as one doesn't have the truth, one is free. Resolution is never achieved, nor is any final position maintained. Possessed truth is banished as "authoritarian" and in its place stands the pursuit of truth; and thus it is said, the mind becomes finally free.

The results that come of such premises are, of course, almost too apparent to spell out: the distrust of all laws that aid in restraining vice, the denial that the law can enshrine morality, the proposition that morality is a matter of something called "value judgment" (which is the opposite of a judgment of fact and, hence, the opposite of what is real, so that morality becomes, as it were, the product of one's glands or of which side of the bed one got out of). Truth and morality being banished, public law is no longer based upon anything but mere consent of all those who are subject to the law. Hence, law is cut off from the objective moral order and becomes a mere convenience. Modern men keep laws because they find it is convenient (what would happen if some people drove on the right side of the street and others on the left? etc.). If it is convenient to have a law, the law is enacted; and if it is not convenient, it is gotten rid of. For the same reason, the law is not "respected," only perhaps feared. After all, no one respects a convenience. That would be like burning incense to a refrigerator.

Those, then, are just a few of the applications in the concrete social order of this liberal definition of liberty. So plausible in its first formulation—the ability to choose between good and evil—it leads to all these consequences and finally involves its proponents in two absurdities that were well noted by the Spanish traditionalist thinker, Donoso Cortes (see his treatise on *Catholicism, Liberalism and Socialism*).

The first absurdity we have already seen in passing—it applies to man. If man's liberty consists in his ability to choose between good and evil, it follows that his liberty is incompatible with his Christian perfection, because Christian perfection is the process of withdrawing from evil and entering more and more into the sway of good. The ideal of the just man, of the holy man, is not of a man for whom good and evil are always equal possibilities, but of one for whom evil becomes less and less a possibility, good more and more a sovereign. The perfection of man requires that man grope toward a position in which he is not equally solicited between good and evil. Hence, if the liberal doctrine of liberty was correct, Christian perfection, any human perfection, would be incompatible with man's liberty.

The second absurd consequence of this doctrine relates to God. Whatever may be said of the saints,

whatever be said even of the highest angels, God at least cannot choose evil. To admit such a liberty in God would be to destroy the divine nature itself; and if this is the definition of liberty, then God must be unfree. But if liberty is the supreme perfection, then the only possible conclusion must be that man is higher than God.

Obviously, there has to be a different definition of liberty if we are to begin to understand the right role of freedom in the social order. What is, in fact, the Catholic definition? Catholic teaching is, first of all, that liberty consists simply in the ability to choose (note that I am leaving out some words there). Now, this is the same thing as saying that liberty is one with intellect and will. Any being endowed with intellect and will is by that very fact free, whether it be a man, or an angel, or God. After I have said that man has intellect and will, I don't need to add a third predicate, free, because it is already contained in the other two. Liberty, then, is nothing in itself but the possession of rationality and will.

Now what does this mean theologically? If freedom, that is, to *be free*, consists in our very power to understand and to will, then God is perfectly free because He understands perfectly and wills perfectly. Indeed, He is infinitely free because His understanding and will are infinite. Man, on the other hand, wills and understands *imperfectly*, hence his freedom is imperfect. And what is the consequence? The consequence is that an error in the intellect, or a malformation in the will renders liberty imperfect, wounds it. Thus the very perfection of liberty, according to the liberal scheme, the ability to choose between good and evil, is, in the Catholic scheme, the *imperfection*.

So long as we are able to choose evil, we are but imperfectly free, for to be able to choose evil is to be able to put evil on a level with good—to make a balance in the mind, to see these two things as equally desirable. But that only means that there must be an error in the intellect, because objectively evil can never be as good as good. In fact, evil is, strictly considered, non-being. There is a radical failure to know what *is* that lies behind every decision to do what is wrong.

To carry this doctrine a bit into the social and political order, if to be free means to know the truth and to love the good, then man's ability to be free depends upon his formation. It depends upon his training, his education, his docility to the authority of parents, teachers, legitimate public officials, to all those authorities who are able to impart through their special competence a superior insight into what is true and a superior example of what is good. The liberal conception of freedom is immediately ruled out and seen, in fact, to be the very disease of society, while the Catholic conception of freedom forms the basis upon which to

build an order that is permeated with incentives to truth and disincentives to error, a society structured into a tissue of actual graces whereby every man may live better because he knows the truth and wills the good.

Now note: because men have choice and judgment, they are subjects of rights. They are so in order precisely that they may do what is right and know what is true (objects of rights). This brings to mind the supremely important statement of Pope Pius XII, who said that there exists no right to believe, or to practice, or to promulgate, or to act upon what is false. There exists no right in the objective order (there is *no such thing* as the right) to believe what is false or to do what is wrong. And this doctrine is, in fact, the constant teaching of the Church, which throughout the centuries has advanced the cause of truth and denied rights to error.

But what do you do about the man who is wrong?

Surely, although error has no right to exist, the man who is mistaken does have a right to exist. Pope Pius XII was surely not decreeing the death penalty for everybody who had the wrong notions about this or that. The solution to this problem is twofold: the confessional state and the positive law of tolerance. (For a full treatment of this subject, see Bernardino Montejano's brilliant study of Vatican II on Liberty, TRIUMPH, April '72).

Here we have an example of the way in which Christian principles structure a society which is full of incentives toward the good, full of norms, full of laws and yet not totalitarian, because (a) it respects the providence of God, to Whom vengeance belongs, (b) it respects the dignity of the individual, and (c) it respects the destiny to which he is called under the sovereign mystery of God's grace. This Christian order allows men a tremendous freedom, much more freedom than the secular order allows them, never, though, ceasing to proclaim and inculcate what is right.

This Christian order also knows how to tolerate, but it knows the difference between toleration and acceptance. Societies of men may have to tolerate a heresy; they may have to tolerate immoral behavior. It may be impossible for them to get a police force big enough to do anything about such acts, or they may find that if they *had* a police force big enough to do something, the police force could be a worse danger than the evils it would try to stop. But in any case, the Christian order is an order which knows how to tolerate without baptizing what is tolerated.

Finally, the Christian order is one which gives to truth its sovereign rights. Remember how the last application of the liberal definition of freedom is to banish truth itself as an authoritarian hangover which gets in the way of intellectual freedom. But in the Catholic order of things, we confess with our Lord Jesus Christ that truth is the very thing that makes us free (John 8:32). Indeed, each sphere and level of truth frees us in its own order. Natural truth frees us from factual and philosophical errors, enabling us to act with judgment and enlighten-

ment in all the temporal affairs of life. Supernatural truth, on the other hand, frees us eternally; it delivers us from bondage to sin and the Devil, allowing us to be for the first time fully free as brothers of Christ and sons of God.

The considerations which flow from these principles are far from being of simply academic interest. They have an urgency for all men in our time and particularly for Americans. The problem with America is not that she is free but that she is not free. The problem with our civil libertarian society is not that it has too much liberty but that it has almost no liberty. For those who are not the servants of God are in bondage to sin. The bondage of sin is the choosing of evil, and the choosing of evil is the radical imperfection of human liberty, not its perfection.

Where the Spirit of God is, says St. Paul, there is liberty. This is a lesson which ought to be read to those who say that the Church has been dragging her heels behind the forward march of mankind, as various bills of rights, and similar declarations have "liberated" the people. Lies!

The Church is the very fountainhead of human freedom, whatever eighteenth-century documents may allege to the contrary. It is from the sovereign liberty of the sons of God that all human freedom is established and empowered to endure. It is only the Church which has given us the example of what it means to be free, and her saints, who have so little to do with the litigious niceties of what "citizens" take to be freedom, who have so little solicitation toward evil and so utter and so prompt an obedience toward the good—those are the men who are free—not the citizen who sits in his home surrounded by a confetti of paper civil liberties. That citizen may be in bondage to the Devil—a state diametrically opposed to freedom.

The Christian's task is to teach America, the nation that believes she brought freedom to the world, what in fact it means to be free. The Catholic must stoop now to the most elementary lessons, to the end that Americans, who have a deep love of liberty, will not in the name of a false liberty slaughter their own unborn, imprison their own children in a secularist ideology, corrupt their own institutions and bring about the downfall of their own country. Unenviable paradox!

A large measure of courage will be required. Catholics will have to convince their liberal friends that the latter are hopelessly ignorant of their own etymon and at the same time convince their conservative friends that they are "conerving" a fraud.

As a symbolic beginning, somebody ought to take down the Statue of Liberty, stone by stone, and reassemble it at a more suitable address. Like out in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral.