**Intersections of Catholic and American Political Thought:**

*A Symposium*

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**Introduction**

-by Gary D. Glenn

This symposium starts from the awareness that there is no tradition of American Catholic political thought. Prior to the events preceding the Founding, there was no American Catholic political thinker of any significance, certainly not of the enduring reputation of such Protestant thinkers as John Witherspoon, Jonathan Mayhew, Isaac Backus, or John Leland.¹ There were very few American Catholics then, and those that were around were usually excluded from politics.²

The only Catholics involved significantly in the American Founding were Charles Carroll, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and Daniel Carroll, signer of the U.S. Constitution of 1787. But their ideas remain unknown to students of American political thought.³ In the 19th century John Carroll, the first American-born bishop, and the essayist Orestes Brownson, were the major post-Founding Catholic political thinkers of any rank who dealt thoughtfully with the relation between their religious and political commitments. With the greater, if cautious, acceptance of Catholics in the 20th century, important theorists like Fathers John Ryan and John Courtney Murray, S.J gained a hearing for the Catholic view of politics. And, in the realm of political practice, John F. Kennedy drew wide attention to the relation of Catholicism and American politics in the early 1960s, as did Governor Mario Cuomo and Senator Edward Kennedy during the 1984 Presidential campaign.⁴

But it is not our purpose in this symposium to uncover a previously hidden tradition of American Catholic political thought. We will show that Catholic and American political thought have more to do with each other than the historical experience of these two traditions suggests. We express their relations
as “intersections.” At intersections, travelers cross each other’s paths. Intersections are necessary because we are not all traveling in precisely the same or parallel directions. But however necessary intersections are dangerous places where collisions are more likely and hence caution is more necessary. If the caution, stop and go signs are obeyed, we can safely cross each other’s path on our way to our different destinations.

The “intersection” metaphor assumes that our political order is “in process” and that its goal is not otherworldly salvation; the goal of Catholics is salvation beyond this world. Although their goals are different, the two move together. To be sure, there is no shortage of Catholic writers who want to reconcile the ends of the American political order and Catholicism. Some Catholic neoconservatives act as if liberal capitalism, free markets, and limited constitutional government are related unproblematically to salvation. Some Catholic political progressives see no tension between salvation and the secular liberal state which tries to exclude citizens’ religiously-grounded morality from public policy.

Both these positions assume that the ways of God and of man can be reconciled unproblematically sometimes. Certainly, hope and reason require that we be open to the possibility of some harmony between our faith and our political order, indeed that we seek such harmony where it may be found. But it endangers our souls to assume either that such harmony has been achieved or that unproblematic harmony is achievable. These dangers are almost an occupational hazard for the many social scientists who see the world, both as it is and as we think it should be.

The “intersection” metaphor allows the symposiasts to seek such harmony as may be from the materials available to us as Catholics, Americans, and social scientists. Our present materials are the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacques Maritain and the Supreme Court of the United States. That we include both non-Americans and non-Catholics requires some explanation. Among secular social scientists, Tocqueville and the Justices of the Supreme Court are acknowledged as exemplars of American political thought. But they are such in different senses. Tocqueville’s thought is commonly recognized as the classic interpretation of American society and government, though written by a Frenchman. The Court’s opinions are American inasmuch as they are “about America” and written “by Americans.” Moreover, the thinking of the Supreme Court Justices today has nearly unassailable political and even moral authority in American social science circles. Maritain’s thought, like Tocqueville’s, is “about America” but not “by an American.” But, unlike Tocqueville, Maritain has no significant standing among secular social scientists. He is included here on the strength of his enduring reputation as a Catholic philosopher and the happy fact that he left us a book length reflection on America.