Aristotelian Political Philosophy, the Wise Many, and Catholic Social Teaching
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In order for individual Catholics to be able to properly comprehend, articulate, and prudentially apply certain foundational components of Catholic social teaching, they need to have a sound grasp of classical political philosophy, particularly as it has come to us through Aristotle. Aristotle’s political thought helps to provide a strong foundation for understanding man’s life as a political animal while simultaneously acknowledging that man’s ultimate destiny is apolitical. Specifically, the convergence of Aristotle’s thought and Catholic social teaching can be seen in, but is not limited to, the following areas: the goodness of political society and authority, choice of regime, and the transpolitical character of the faith. These points of Aristotelian political philosophy, often misunderstood in light of modern liberalism, can assist Catholics in bearing public witness to the essential relationship between faith and political life, since the goodness of political life must be aligned with the truth of who man is, something that both Aristotle and Catholic social teaching rightly affirm.

The tradition of Aristotelian political philosophy, which to some degree lays at the foundation of all Western legal structures, provides a helpful guide to understanding the proper relationship between faith and politics. Moreover, Aristotle’s thought must be properly understood if it is to serve as a reliable guide about political affairs, and as a largely complementary foundation for the proper articulation of certain fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching. To this end, the present article addresses a common misunderstanding of Aristotle’s thought and argument regarding what he calls “the wisdom of the many.” It must not be forgotten that Christians are “political animals,” and so appreciating accurately Aristotle’s principles for a sound political philosophy helps define the good of politics and what it can achieve, while simultaneously highlighting its necessary limitations, thus stemming the tide of tyranny that sees no limits beyond its own self-determining will and that conflates the order of politics with metaphysics or theology. The great achievement of Aristotelian political philosophy is the recognition that our political activity must be aligned with the truth of who man is, thereby upholding the goodness of—
and the necessary distinction between—the hierarchical order of politics and contemplation. The failure to recognize this point, James Schall notes, is at the “heart of all contemporary ideological political theory,”\(^2\) and demonstrates why politics is so often incapable of achieving its own naturally good ends.

This essay will first provide an investigation of Aristotle’s argument regarding the wise many in *Politics* 3.11, paying special attention to the metaphors used, for they can be brushed over quickly and misunderstood. Within this first section, I will demonstrate the political ramifications of the metaphors, highlighting primarily the many’s capacity for good deliberation and political action. Second, I want to show that this positive claim for the sovereignty of the many does not undermine Aristotle’s understanding of the active life of politics and the life of contemplation. The good of politics must be placed in its proper intellectual context regarding the contemplative order, and this is precisely what Aristotle does. Finally, throughout the essay, I will draw out the implications of those points insofar as they directly relate to, or articulate more clearly, certain fundamental aspects of Catholic social doctrine.

**ARISTOTLE AND THE WISE MANY**

In chapter 11, book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle provides an argument for the sovereignty of the many citizens in political society. While Aristotle’s claim is not a defense of democracy *simpliciter* (since democracy is a deviant constitution), he does nevertheless incorporate some rather insightful metaphors as a means to strengthen and clarify his methodology concerning the many. Aristotle’s argument is framed in a positive context and not merely used in a negative light as simply the best protection against the abuses of tyranny and oligarchy—though it is that as well. Let us turn to the body of Aristotle’s argument for the wise multitude:

The many, of whom none is individually an excellent man, nevertheless can when joined together be better—not as individuals but all together—than those (who are best), just as dinners contributed (by many) can be better than those equipped from a single expenditure. For because they are many, each can have a part of virtue and prudence, and on their joining together, the multitude, with its many feet and hands and having many senses, becomes like a single human being, and so also with respect to character and mind. Thus the many are also better judges of the works of music and of the poets; some appreciate a certain part, and all of them all the parts.\(^3\)
Aristotle’s political realism is clear: He confirms that many individuals do not lead virtuous lives, but his argument does not presuppose that lack of perfect virtue entails exclusion from rule. Wide participation can help foster a degree of good and just political actions through common, public deliberation, since a body may make “better, wiser, and abler decisions through the benefit of each person’s knowledge, experience, judgment, and insight—which they can synthesize into collective knowledge, experience, judgment, and insight.” In this section, I will primarily consider the first of three analogies (“Potluck”) on which Aristotle bases his argument, and the second (“many parts”) will be alluded to when treating the first metaphor. Moreover, I want to clarify what seems to be Aristotle’s primary justification for the ordinary citizen’s claim to rule. Again, the argument is not an attempt to convert democracy into a good regime, nor is it a contention that democracy is the best regime today. It is instead intended to consider the manner and reason for Aristotle’s position that the many could achieve some level of good and worthy political deliberation, which would thereby help to strengthen the orientation of political society towards the common good.

Aristotle’s first argument is as follows: “The many, of whom none is individually an excellent man, nevertheless can when joined together be better—not as individuals but all together—than those (who are best), just as dinners contributed (by many) can be better than those equipped from a single expenditure.” Thomas Lindsay states that the feast simile relates catering capacity to political judgment, and appears to reduce the claim to mere collective quantity: “the question then becomes: Is a feast of a large number of common dishes superior to that provided by one or a few culinary experts? In these terms, the ascendancy claimed by the multitude narrows to the realm of quantity, unless vulgar dishes become refined through aggregation.” However, in the context of the argument, Aristotle seems to be using the analogy to refute the claim of the oligarchs, since the many do have an argument against those claiming to merit authority over the governing body on the basis of virtue alone, and similarly also against those claiming it on the basis of wealth: Nothing prevents the multitude from being at some point better than the few and wealthier—not as individuals but taken together. Moreover, Aristotle is not arguing for quantity as the basis for a good potluck diner, but rather that the multitude qua multitude could possibly bring dishes that would be better than the few dishes of the culinary experts. In this regard, according to Mary Nichols, one must not reduce the experience of dining with others to the assessment of culinary expertise. What must be taken into account when judging the goodness of a meal is also the entirety of the dining experience itself.
The potluck argument also seems to be oriented towards a deeper point concerning good political deliberation: “the many dishes that are present at the dining experience would be analogous to the numerous diverse parts of a city. The various foods might reflect the propitious heterogeneity of the city, even as the common meal promotes social integration.” Aristotle is also using the act of “mixing” to bolster his point: “for all of them when joined together have an adequate perception and, once mixed with those who are better, bring benefit to cities, just as impure sustenance mixed with the pure makes the whole more useful than the small amount of the latter.” This analogy of mixing points to the integration of those who individually are not as good with those who are better than they, for it is a common project of deliberation for some good of the many, even if some of the parts on their own are not good themselves. Furthermore, Aristotle’s “impure sustenance” does not refer to something that is poisonous, for diluting it with something pure “was a sign of civilization and moderation against barbaric sensuous, self-indulgence.” It may be useful, at this point, to illustrate a possible potluck scenario, thus to capture and understand Aristotle’s metaphor more clearly.

Imagine that a local neighborhood has decided to set up an annual Christmas festival to celebrate the upcoming holiday. Certain neighbors must take it upon themselves to ensure that they have access to all the addresses of everyone in the area, so that if any are missing, they can acquire them from someone else, or find the house so as to hand deliver an invitation. These people will be in charge of helping to create invitations which will inform all the possible attendees that they are required to make one of two dishes, either a main course or a dessert. Suppose that, besides the initial group of people gathering addresses and creating the invitations, a different set of neighbors decides that they will be accountable for keeping a record of every meal that is going to be brought to the party. They will send out mass e-mails or go door-to-door to make a list of what each family will be bringing. This preliminary recording is done not only in the hopes of bringing a greater variety of meals to the festival, but more so to motivate those attending to cook those meals that they are best at making, thereby ensuring the manifestation of their good qualities and work. It must not be forgotten, however, that the purpose of this common celebration will not be merely the enjoyment of the food, but also the cultivation of friendship and promotion of the bonds of unity within the neighborhood itself.

The above example offers some insight into Aristotle’s original metaphor and its relationship to the wisdom of the many in political matters. The organization of the event requires good deliberation among all those
who are involved, since it takes necessary skills to know each contributor’s qualities and capacities, and further demonstrates the capacity for common action. Since the planning and organization needed for the festival could certainly entail conflict concerning a variety of issues, the good deliberative character of all involved can help each recognize the contributions and qualities of others, therefore eliminating the necessity of “strict equality of power.” To this end, the neighborhood will be able to not only reduce natural conflicts, but also order the body of people to put aside personal agendas for the sake of accomplishing a particular good. Finally, this situation is such that it can help to inculcate a level of civic peace and friendship among the neighbors through participation in the collective process of deliberation, thereby increasing the clear-minded capacity for good actions, since, as Aristotle writes elsewhere, “two persons working together either in intellectual endeavor or external activity are more effective.” This cultivation of friendship aligns with Aristotle’s insistence upon private property being natural to man, the result of which is that citizens seek to share their private possessions in common with others to bring about greater social unity.

Aristotle continues his argument through a second metaphor: “For because they are many, each can have a part of virtue and prudence, and on their joining together, the multitude, with its many feet and hands and having many senses, becomes like a single human being, and so also with respect to character and mind.” Good deliberation and legislative activity would require what Aristotle calls “co-rulers.” The many eyes and senses would be necessary for all the requisite information concerning a particular issue to make better prudential judgments regarding action. Wilson connects the “many ears” with good judgment, referring to the mutual attentiveness of the citizens, which fosters trust and civic concord. Since Aristotle doubts that a few excellent citizens could foster good common action, it would appear that increased citizen-wide participation in political matters would help to inculcate good deliberative and common action among a variety of citizens. As mentioned earlier in relationship to the Nicomachean Ethics, this establishes and integrates the political relationship between knowledge, judgment, virtue, and action, teaching citizens how “to rule and be ruled.”

THE GOODNESS OF POLITICAL SOCIETY AND RULERSHIP IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

Aristotle’s thought concerning the many has implications for understanding some fundamental tenets of Catholic social teaching. While a number of points could be drawn out from the two preceding sections, I will limit...
my focus to two key elements: 1) the origin and nature of political society, and 2) the goodness and necessity of political rule or authority. These two components are specifically mentioned in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, at chapter 4 on “The Life of the Political Community.”

In the beginning of chapter 4, after briefly describing the various cultural and socio-economic changes that were affecting the modern world, the Council goes on to explain the significant effect this has had upon political life as whole. The Council was moved to address the foundations of what constitutes a genuinely political society, and how its organization relates to Catholic moral and social doctrine. The document begins by treating what I listed as the first essential element, the origin and nature of political authority:

Men, families and the various groups which make up the civil community are aware that they cannot achieve a truly human life by their own unaided efforts. They see the need for a wider community, within which each one makes his specific contribution every day toward an ever-broader realization of the common good. For this purpose they set up a political community according to various forms. The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy.  

The Church is recalling what Aristotle taught in the beginning of the *Politics*, that man is a political and social animal by nature. Contrary to Hobbes, Locke, and modern political philosophy, the political community is not something from which we are free by nature, and therefore that we only enter as a contractual means for the protection of our bodily and material goods. Moreover, political society is not simply an instrumental good, an association that provides protection from the worst of criminals and helps merely to establish some relative form of “civic peace.” Rather, political society is the final cause, the goal to which all other smaller and incomplete associations point as a terminus. The smaller organic groups such as the family and household naturally have been formed for providing the basic necessities and goods that we are due in justice as human beings, along with the procreation and education of offspring. Nevertheless, these essential goods do not encompass the totality of what it means to live “a truly human life,” a life lived according to the moral and intellectual virtues.
The common good of the political community, which is complete and self-sufficient, is that in which the citizens can participate, especially through those uniquely political activities that Aristotle mentioned, namely, “ruling and being ruled in turn.” Man, through his participation in the common good, which is in harmony with his individual and familial good, is able to “adequately and readily attain his own perfection,” that perfection which belongs to him as man, since the common good is understood to be the good or happiness of the members of the community. For Aquinas, while man’s perfection as man, as he exists within political society, is ultimately inferior to that supernatural perfection attainable only by grace, this natural perfection is not opposed to his supernatural happiness, since grace presupposes and builds upon nature. St. Thomas quite clearly posits that the only two possible reasons for one not to be a member of society is personal wickedness or the belief that one can be self-sufficient.

Moving on to the second essential element, the goodness and necessity of political rule or authority, Gaudium et Spes continues:

If the political community is not to be torn apart while everyone follows his own opinion, there must be an authority to direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one’s freedom and sense of responsibility. It is clear, therefore, that the political community and public authority are founded on human nature and hence belong to the order designed by God, even though the choice of a political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of citizens.

Since man is political by nature, and so organizes himself into a community that is oriented towards the common good, it follows that there must be some competent authority to guide citizens to achieving this common good. It is important to see the intrinsic link between how political society is conceived and the related conception of such a society’s legitimate claim to authority, for how we understand the former will necessarily determine our answer to the latter. St. Thomas brings up this very point in the Summa Theologiae, when he considers whether man would have exercised political authority over others in the preternatural state.

Before answering the question, Aquinas provides an essential distinction between two different kinds of rule. The first type is despotic rule, which has as its analog the relationship between a master and slave. The slave is ruled by the master simply for the goods and purposes determined
by the master. Moreover, the master-slave relationship as a form of despotic rule is similar to the relationship of the body and soul, where the body has no principle or movement that renders it capable of resisting the commands of the soul. Likewise, the slave is incapable of resisting the commands of the master because of the fact that the slave is ordered, as a part, only to whatever good has been chosen by the master, with no concern for the welfare of the slave. This form of rule would not have existed in the preternatural state. However, there is a second type of rule that is properly called political, a form of rule whereby one who is in a position of authority rules over freemen (like reason ruling the appetites, which have a natural desire to be under this rule, but have a movement of resistance proper to it), and leads others both to their own proper good and to the good of the entire community.

Aquinas notes that this proper conception of rule would have existed in the preternatural state for the following reasons. First, since man is a social and political animal, he would have naturally organized himself into a community of men for attaining some good that he could not achieve individually. He continues by arguing that, “For many, as such, seek many things, whereas one attends only to one. Wherefore the Philosopher says, in the beginning of the Politics, that wherever many things are directed to one, we shall always find one at the head directing them.” This passage has profound implications for a sound political philosophy, because Aquinas is countering the tendency, particularly in light of certain elements within St. Augustine, to see government and political society as the logical consequence of Original Sin, the necessary check upon, and containing force against, the wickedness of men. Political rule, from this perspective, would not then be necessary in a society full of good citizens, since their virtue would be enough to satisfy their proper orientation towards, and willing of, the common good. Yet Aquinas is positing that, even in a virtuous and good society, men would still have to be placed under an authority that would be capable of directing them to the common good of the whole society, and his reasoning is quite lucid. Men order their lives in such unique and various ways that they naturally direct themselves to choose any number of different particular goods, and so there must be an authority that not only guides the choice of these goods to be so ordained to the common good, but also in order that citizens are committed to choosing the various practical goods that actually help to build up the social order and the organic parts that constitute it. These various goods of the social order must be willed as the necessary part of the common good, as good in themselves, but never chosen at the detriment of, or in contrast to, the good of the whole. Additionally, since there could be various good means
through which the common good may be achieved, it would be necessary that the pertinent authority select the means that is best fitted for bringing it about. However, this would not be the result of a society that is evil or deficient, but the manifestation and abundance of virtue, freedom, and excellence.\textsuperscript{33}

The second reason why political rule would have existed in the preternatural state is rooted in the differing degrees of virtue and knowledge that come to exist within men, something that is both natural and beneficial to others. Yves Simon calls this the “perfective function” of authority, which he describes in the following way:

Assuming that a community is made of people fully capable of self-government in the pursuit of their personal good; assuming that their direction toward the common good and the unity of their common action are assured by proper authority, it is still expedient that those who are less gifted—less intelligent, less experienced, less strong-willed, less virtuous—be guided by those who possess a more excellent degree of reason, will power, and virtue. This guidance is not absolutely indispensable as is that exercised over a child; it is not so cogently needed as is the power which directs society toward its common good and unifies its common action. It is not indispensable to the esse of personal good or to that of the common good, but it is necessary to their bene esse.\textsuperscript{34}

The “responsibility, dignity, and importance of leaders” not only follows from the fact that the proper exercise of their authority is for the common good, but also from the fact that statesmen themselves are called to be good. As mentioned above,\textsuperscript{35} this does not mean that statesmen must be perfect in virtue in order to rule, but that society ought to strive in such a way that it seeks rulers guided by that virtue proper to political life and the right ordering of society, namely, prudence. Therefore, what is being stressed here is that laws are binding in conscience not as a result of the virtue of the rulers, but because the laws are in accord with the common good and the dictates of natural law. This is precisely why law can be so defined as “a precept of reason, ordering actions towards the common good, by one who has care over the community, and promulgated.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{SOVEREIGNTY AND THE ORDER OF POLITICS}

At the beginning of chapter 4, book VI, Aristotle details what the best democracy will look like:
Of the four sorts of democracy . . . the best people is the farming sort, so that it is possible also to create the best democracy wherever the multitude lives from farming or herding. For on account of not having much property . . . it is unable to hold frequent assemblies. Because they do not have the necessary things, they spend their time at work and do not desire the things of others; indeed, working is more pleasant to them than engaging in politics and ruling, where there are not great spoils to be gotten from office. For the many strive more for profit than honor.\(^37\)

Considering what has been posited thus far in this paper, the above statement should make us wonder: Has Aristotle contradicted himself? If the definition of citizenship is to have a share in the constitution, by deliberating and judging, then how could the best democracy be one exemplified by farmers who have such little share in the constitution? Since political participation in the regime constitutes the potential fulfillment of our nature as political animals, then little or no participation would seem to be a violation of our human nature, and an obstacle to eudaimonia.\(^38\) An over-emphasis on political rule, however, creates an imbalance between Aristotle’s conception of the life of the statesmen and that of the philosopher. Such a distortion can be remedied through a brief analysis of Politics book VII, a point where Aristotle directly addresses the issue at hand.

Aristotle begins book VII by emphasizing that before an analysis of the best regime can begin, it is necessary to determine what is the best way of life, for the best regime can only be determined after this initial inquiry has been answered.\(^39\) He goes on to affirm that being composed of body and soul, citizens of a regime will need both external goods and internal goods of the soul, since no man can even consider the highest things of the contemplative life if he is wanting in basic necessities.\(^40\) Yet, Aristotle is clear that the external goods of the body differ from happiness, for “the good things that are external to the soul the cause is chance and fortune; but no one is just or sound by fortune or through fortune.”\(^41\) Aristotle is clarifying this point as a foundation for a shift into the question of whether it is right to say that happiness for an individual is equivalent to the happiness of the city. If we ascribe living well to wealth, honor, tyrannical rule, or virtue, then a city will be considered excellent when it acquires wealth, honor, tyrannical rule, or virtue. Since the best way of life for the city is one that is in accord with virtue, at this point Aristotle investigates which is the more choice-worthy way of life, the active life of politics or the life of contemplation. He describes the dispute thus:
For some renounce political power, and think that the life of the freeman is different from the life of the statesman and the best of all; but others think the life of the statesman best. The argument of the latter is that he who does nothing cannot do well, and that virtuous activity is identical with happiness.\footnote{42}

Aristotle says that both arguments have substantive claims, but that taken in isolation, each fails to grasp the entire picture correctly:

The first class are right in affirming that the life of the freeman is better than the life of the despot; for there is nothing grand or noble in having the use of a slave, in so far as he is a slave; or in issuing commands about necessary things. But it is an error to suppose that every sort of rule is despotic like that of a master over slaves, for there is as great a difference between the rule over freemen and the rule over slaves as there is between slavery by nature and freedom by nature.\footnote{43}

To rule over freemen is what differentiates political from despotic rule, and demonstrates the nobility and goodness of the active life of politics for Aristotle. However, if man is the highest being, then politics will be the highest science, political rule will become the complete expression of virtue, and these notions will cultivate the temptation to turn politics into that which defines man to be what he is essentially.\footnote{44} A monarchical regime is one whereby the most excellent citizen rules the city, and the other citizens willingly defer to his rule out of his superiority in virtue and political rule. Along with his recognition of the rarity of such a superior citizen, Aristotle also clearly sees that this continual striving after political rule can easily lead to tyranny if it is held up to be the summum bonum for human life. Politics would then be incapable of achieving its genuine good, for we would be forced to judge the tyrant as a good man, even though his lust for power and ultimate authority in the city is sought at any cost.\footnote{45} However, for Aristotle, it is the contemplative life that is most in accord with the type of being that man is, since contemplation is more complete in itself and involves those sorts of studying and ways of thinking which are not for the sake of something other than its own:

Yes, but such a life (contemplative) will be too high for human attainment. It will not be lived by us in our merely human capacity but in virtue of something divine within us, and so far as this divine particle is superior to man’s composite nature, to that extent will its activity be superior to that of the other forms of excellence.\footnote{46}
The political way of life, while a noble and necessary good, cannot be man’s highest end, for otherwise “God and the entire universe could hardly be in a fine condition, since they have no external actions beyond those that are proper to themselves.” Aristotle’s point is, following what he says at the end of the *Ethics*, that the end of the political or active life is not the highest good of man, however good it is in its own proper order.  

**REGIME CHOICE AND THE TRANSPOLITICAL CHARACTER OF THE FAITH**  
Catholic social teaching not only affirms that political society and its requisite public authority are natural to man, but also seeks to firmly establish the fact that “the choice of a political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of its citizens.” The Church’s position on regime choice must not be overlooked, for it is frequently purported that democracy is not only the best regime today, but that it is the only regime that is fully compatible with Catholicism, almost as if the two cannot exist without one another. Here, I will highlight two important reasons for the Church proclaiming the legitimacy of various political regimes: The first stems from the nature of political life and its relation to the common good; the second concerns the relationship of political life to the transpolitical character of the faith, to the fact that man is ultimately called to something which extends beyond life in political society, namely, communion and supernatural beatitude with God.

Aristotle and St. Thomas both taught that there were a variety of existing political regimes that stemmed from the various conceptions of justice understood by each. Each of the good constitutions were capable of promoting some element of the common good: Monarchy is the rule by one who is superior in merit or virtue; aristocracy is rule by a few who have complementary levels of virtue and ruling expertise; and timocracy is rule by many (not all) who have a moderate level of virtue and self-government. Each of these good forms of rule does not fully, in se, encapsulate the totality of the common good, and this is the case from the fact that each of these regimes has a corresponding form that is a distortion of justice. For example, a despotic form of rule by one who rules only for his own selfish and vicious motives would be a tyranny; the rule of a few whose claim to authority stems simply from the accumulation of wealth and property, instead of virtue and expertise, would be an oligarchy; and rule of the many poor who seem to rule for their own interests and cultivate envy against the opposite socio-economic class would be a democracy.

As a result of the aforementioned divisions, the prudential and more desirable form of rule would be a polity, a mixed regime that integrates the
various types of rule, and which would better help to secure, and actualize, the common good. Aquinas makes this very same point in the *Summa Theologiae*:

Accordingly, the best form of government is in a state or kingdom, where one is given the power to preside over all; while under him are others having governing powers: and yet a government of this kind is shared by all, both because all are eligible to govern, and because the rules are chosen by all. For this is the best form of polity, being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly aristocracy, in so far as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e. government by the people, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers.\(^{51}\)

The best regime cannot be any regime *simpliciter*, but a mixing of the various good elements of rulership, something that even revelation itself affirms, and this is for two reasons. First, as already mentioned, each of the individual regimes cannot, in themselves, instantiate the common good in every respect. Moreover, each of the regimes requires a principle outside of itself, and in opposition to its own thought, to act as a check upon its distortions or evil tendencies. So the Church fosters the existence of various political regimes because no regime can fully promote the common good, and while it is true that the Church does not favor any specific regime over another, she does nevertheless affirm that some regimes are more compatible with her mission of saving souls than others.\(^{52}\)

As mentioned above, a number of Catholic thinkers have portrayed the relationship between Catholicism and modern democracy as of each one presupposing the other, resulting in a mindset whereby the inherent problems of the modern democratic ethos are smoothed over, or even denied. However, this understanding of democracy rejects Aristotle’s explanation (as well as Aquinas’s) of why democracy was considered to be a deviant constitution, for justice in democratic societies is held to be something equal; equality requires that whatever the multitude resolves is authoritative, and freedom and equality involve doing whatever one wants. So in democracies of this sort everyone lives as he wants and toward whatever end he craves, as Euripides says. . . . To live with a view to the regime should not be supposed to be slavery, but preservation.\(^{53}\)

Democracy was not based upon natural or divine law, but rooted in nothing other than an illusory form of human autonomy that saw no order...
beyond the will’s own self-legislation. This society was often characterized by an understanding of liberty whose only standard of justice was the disordered human will and whatever it chose to do, no matter the content of those choices. Furthermore, as Simon mentions, modern democratic societies are the most difficult to preserve:

This is the case since preserving principles is more difficult in democracy than in any other regime as a result of liberalism, which implies that the principles of society and what its end is are not above deliberation and must be thrown into the universal competition of opinions. This is the jeopardizing of the principles without which social life no longer has an end or form.\textsuperscript{54}

The point to be made here is not that democracy should be rejected as evil per se, as if Catholicism and democracy were enemies, since this would be a denial of both Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as being contrary to the Church’s prudential historical judgment about certain good elements of democratic theory. Nor can we too readily hold the view aptly described by Pierre Manent, whereby “modern democracy understands itself not as a regime among others, not even as the best regime, but as the only legitimate regime: it embodies the final, because rational, state of humanity.”\textsuperscript{55} This perspective seems more akin to Ober’s position mentioned above, where democracy becomes more than just a means, but the goal of society, and to prevent man from participating in the democratic ordering of society would be to violate his nature as a political and social animal. Instead, what is needed is the recognition of a friendly but critical position, recalling the tradition of classical political philosophy and its relation to modern political philosophy, as well as asserting the primordial openness of classical philosophy to Christian revelation.\textsuperscript{56}

This brings us to the second reason for the Church proclaiming the legitimacy of various political regimes: the transpolitical character of the faith. Modern and postmodern political thought stress the separation of reason and revelation, the political and contemplative orders. This has led to a disordered tendency of seeing politics as the highest good for man, often giving to this practical science a role that is traditionally linked with the speculative sciences, particularly metaphysics or theology. This frequently leads to the overestimation of the goodness of political rule and the inherent goodness of democratic societies at the expense of transpolitical goods that are at the foundation of society. The Church has reiterated the necessity of establishing good laws for the assistance of living virtuously, since man’s moral flourishing can only come to be in and through political society. Through the cultivation of certain exterior habits, laws
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can provide a framework whereby citizens can become better and be protected from the most vicious of crimes. Nevertheless, as Aquinas reminds us, human laws are not sufficient to lead man to his ultimate happiness, since man is constituted in such a manner that he is more than just merely natural: “But since man is ordained to an end of eternal happiness which is disproportionate to man’s natural faculty, as stated above, therefore it was necessary that, besides the natural and the human law, man should be directed to his end by a law given by God.”

Man has a life and goods that surpass ordination to political society, since the human person is drawn beyond the political community: “man is not ordained to the body politic, according to all that he is and has . . . but all that man is, and has, must be referred to God.” It is for this reason that Jacques Maritain, at the beginning of his classic work, Integral Humanism, stated that, “To offer to man only the human is to betray man.” Maritain later refers to this as the “peregrinal” component of the body politic, whereby what man is in the totality of his being, what constitutes his happiness and ultimate end, does not fall to the political sphere to determine or recreate, even though man needs political society for the happiness that is proper to him as man. This point, along with the above citation of St. Thomas,

is perhaps the foundation for all genuine societal reform, and the starting ground for sound reflections upon politics, especially in connection with Catholic social thought. What is at stake is the very nature and order of politics, of what constitutes a truly “political life.” In Catholic social teaching, there is always the realization that in order for politics to be itself, and accomplish what it is meant to in accord with man’s nature as a social and political animal, it must point to that which is ultimately not political.

CONCLUSION

In book III, chapter 11 of the Politics, Aristotle makes a case for sovereignty of the people such that the wise many can help to, at a certain level, inculcate civic peace and friendship within society through participation in the collective process of deliberation, thereby increasing capacity for good political activity. By rejecting the extremes of despotic rule of the wealthy or the poor in a democracy, what comes into being is a moderate virtuous citizenry, thereby promoting good political deliberation and action against a dichotomous division between an elite class and citizens who know only how to be ruled. In this light, the achievement of politics is established by
participation in the constitution through the definitive activities of good political judgment and deliberation. Nevertheless, Aristotle does not see the goodness of politics as requiring that politics become metaphysics or theology. If this were so, then one would have to pursue political power as equivalent to happiness, or posit that man is only natural in his very ontological structure, asserting then that what man is will be entirely exhausted by politics. As a logical consequence, one debilitates the aim of politics, therein making it incapable of achieving its genuine good, namely, the establishment of virtuous human living among men in community.

A sound understanding of Aristotle’s thought assists Catholics to properly comprehend, articulate, and prudentially apply certain foundational components of Catholic social teaching. It promotes the affirmation, along with Pope Benedict XVI, that “the just ordering of society is . . . a central responsibility of politics,”61 and helps realize that the Church is not pushing any political agenda, but seeks “to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly.”62 Through the integration of faith, morality, and politics, the Church simultaneously acknowledges the goodness and necessity of the political order, and that man’s ultimate completion and happiness is essentially not a political project. As Peter Augustine Lawler reminds us, “man’s true home lies elsewhere,”63 and this final residence will be nothing other than communion with God.

Notes

4. Ibid. 3.1279a39–b1; 5.1301b40–02a2; 1304b4–5.
6. Yves Simon (*Philosophy of Democratic Government*) and Jacques Maritain (*Man and the State*) provide rigorous and careful argumentation for the compatibility between Thomistic political philosophy and modern liberal democracy. Both establish insightful points; Simon seems to be more prudentially balanced in his claims. He draws out a number of the goods that have resulted from modern democratic rule, but ultimately argues for a mixed regime, an integration that would balance out the dangers and weaknesses of the various regimes. See Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, 124. Maritain, on the other hand, is certainly more excessively ambitious in supporting the so-called “democratic charter.” For a thorough and excellent analysis of their arguments and some of the difficulties they entail, see John Hittinger, “Jacques Maritain and Yves R. Simon’s
Use of Thomas Aquinas in Their Defense of Liberal Democracy,” in Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory (New York: Lexington Books, 2002), 21–34. Perhaps one of the best recent treatments of whether democracy is the best regime today, particularly relating to Catholicism and the order of politics, is Marc Guerra’s Christians as Political Animals: Taking the Measure of Modernity and Modern Democracy (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2010).


8. Pol. 3.1283b30–34; italics mine.


12. See Wilson, “Deliberation,” 264; Winthrop, “Aristotle on Participatory Democracy,” 159. Aquinas makes a similar point in the ST, I, 96.4, concerning whether man would have authority over another in the preternatural state. Aquinas affirms that man is a social being and would need to be directed towards the common good of society, for even in a good and virtuous society, there would need to be an authority to induce and lead citizens to the common good. Moreover, Aquinas states that we should be led by those who have a higher degree of virtue and knowledge, since this would benefit the whole of the community. This is what Yves Simon calls the “perfective argument.” My point, simply, is that Aquinas’s justification for the need of political authority even in the preternatural state would be analogous to Aristotle’s argument for “mixing” in the sense described above. Also see Aquinas, ST, I-II, 105, 1.


16. It is also necessary to call attention to the essential role Aristotle places upon friendship within political society, something that is entirely missing in political philosophy since the Enlightenment; see Michael Pakaluk, “Political Friendship, Ancient and Modern,” in Proceedings of the Boston University Institute for Philosophy and Religion, ed. Lee Rouner (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992–1993), 197–214.

17. Pol. 3.1281b4–8.

18. 265. Aristotle places great emphasis upon the wise many of the middle class, which is without factional conflict, and is more durable since more have a greater share in the constitution. Those from the middle class are better legislators, and since they have little class conflict, there is greater affection for the city.

19. See also Wilson, “Deliberation,” 265.

20. This is not to say that the citizens are virtuous in the way that the good man is, which will be a strong argument against democracy. However, my point is that taking Aristotle’s collective argument for good political deliberation and judgment does presuppose a certain amount of virtue, even if not the complete virtue of the good man. For example, when a body comes together for public deliberation, those involved must have demonstrated that their modus operandi is the common good of political society, and not their own private interests. Good deliberative capacity and execution requires that the element of shame be upheld as a means of preventing corruption and mere autonomous self-interest in public reasoning. This includes a negative element of restraint through public shame, but inculcates the positive element of the virtue of truthfulness. For further discussions of the necessity of virtue in political deliberation, see Paul Nieuwenburg, “Learning to Deliberate: Aristotle on Truthfulness and Public Deliberation,” Political Theory 32:4 (August 2004): 449–67; James D. Fearon, “Deliberation as Discussion,” in Deliberative Democracy, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 52–55.


22. Gaudium et Spes, #74.

23. St. Thomas states that political society has a two-fold finality: (1) the intrinsic finality that is ordered toward the common good, which is a shared life of virtue for those who are ruled; (2) the extrinsic finality which is ordained to the further end that is communion with God; see St. Thomas’s On Kingship, to the King of Cyprus, trans. G. B. Phelan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1949), bk. II, chaps. 3–4. While it may seem obvious that man is in need of political society, it has often been a rather neglected point even among Christian political theorists. Furthermore, Germain Grisez’s point seems to have greatly influenced the manner in which people think the Church views political society since the onset of the Second Vatican Council: “Both Aristotle and Thomas hold that the general promotion of virtue and suppression of vice should be the main component of the common good of political society; in this, they overlook limits on the competence of the state which have been clarified by recent Church teaching regarding the instrumental character of political society’s common good, the principle of subsidiarity . . . and religious liberty.” This is quoted in Finnis, “Public Good: the Specifically Political Common Good in Aquinas,” 63. For an excellent response to Finnis’s account of the aim of political society, see Michael
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24. St. Thomas writes that “It belongs to legal justice to direct to the common good those matters which concern private individuals: whereas on the contrary it belongs to particular justice to direct the common good to particular individuals by way of distribution”; ST, II-II.61.1.

25. See Aquinas, ST, II-II. 61.5.ad.4: “Legal justice alone regards the common weal directly; but by commanding the other virtues it draws them all into the service of the common weal, as the Philosopher declares (Ethic. v, 1). For we must take note that it concerns the human virtues, as we understand them here, to do well not only towards the community, but also towards the parts of the community, viz., towards the household, or even towards one individual.”

26. See Aquinas, ST, II-II, 47.10. ad. 2. When analyzing Aquinas’s commentary on the Politics I, Lawrence Dewan claims that to the degree that the political community is ordered towards virtue, it is in fact ordered towards imperfect beatitude: “Thomas conceives the completeness of the political community as a completeness that leads to virtue . . . The common good of the city, so considered, seems very close to the ultimate end of human life.” See Dewan’s “St. Thomas, John Finnis, and the Political Good,” The Thomist 64 (2000): 360–61.

27. See Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics, 1.1.20.

28. #74.

29. I, 96.4.

30. Ibid.

31. This interwoven and necessary relationship between the whole of political society and its parts is summed up well by Pope Pius XI in Divini Redemptoris (1937): “But just as in the living organism it is impossible to provide for the good of the whole unless each single part and each individual member is given what it needs for the exercise of its proper functions, so it is impossible to care for the social organism and the good of society as a unit unless each single part and each individual member—that is to say, each individual man in the dignity of his human personality—is supplied with all that is necessary for the exercise of his social functions. If social justice be satisfied, the result will be an intense activity in economic life as a whole, pursued in tranquillity and order. This activity will be proof of the health of the social body, just as the health of the human body is recognized in the undisturbed regularity and perfect efficiency of the whole organism” (51). This not only pertains to particular goods chosen, but even more so to particular virtues of individuals.

32. This would be the Church’s teaching concerning the principle of subsidiarity. Yves Simon calls this the “principle of autonomy,” and expresses it in the following manner: “It is perfectly obvious that there is more life and, unqualifiedly, greater perfection in a community all parts of which are full of initiative than in a community whose parts act merely as instruments transmitting the initiative of the whole” (Simon, Philosophy of Democratic Government, 130).

33. A fuller treatment of this topic would be needed to give full justice to it, so I only mention it in brief. Yves Simon’s treatment of this relationship between
authority, particular goods, and the common good is still perhaps one of the best treatments on this subject. See chapter 1, “General Theory of Government,” in *Philosophy of Democratic Government*.

35. Seen note 20, above.
38. This argument is put forth by Ober, “Natural Capacities and Democracy as a Good-in-Itself.”
39. It is necessary to draw attention to this stark contrast between Aristotle and modern political philosophy: Aristotle bases the order of political society upon the foundation of the good life, whereas modern political philosophy first determines the ideal regime, and orders society accordingly.
40. See *E.N.* 1.13
42. Ibid., 1325a19–23.
43. Ibid. 1325a24–29.
49. *Gaudium et Spes*, #74.
50. See note 6 above.
51. *ST*, I-II, 105, 1.c. Aquinas’s point here is that since the mixed regime is the best form of government for man in this life, it simultaneously provides a clear recognition that man’s ultimate happiness is not a political endeavor relegated to this life; cf. James V. Schall, “The Best Form of Government: A Perspective on the Continuity of Political Theory,” *Review of Politics* 40 (January 1978): 97–123.

56. These are the two dialectics that Marc Guerra says Christian thinkers must engage in so that they can better understand the faith’s true relationship to
modernity, liberal democracy, and political life; see Guerra’s *Christians as Political Animals*, particularly chaps. 5 and 6.

57. *ST*, I-II, 91.4. It is also important to mention that as a result of sin, and the fact that men in this life can only be led to virtue “by degrees,” human laws and the goodness of political society are limited and insufficient for human beings; cf. *ST*, I-II, 95.1.

58. Ibid., 21.4.ad.3.

59. Maritain, in congruity with Aquinas, rightly states that the goodness of political life is not a mere means, but an infravalent end, an end in its own right that is necessary to man as a composite being, but not his final ultimate end, which transcends his natural orientation towards the political community; see Maritain’s *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom*, chaps. 4–6. Also see Brian Jones, “Catholicism and Libertarianism,” *Catholic World Report* (November 18, 2013).

60. Jones, “Catholicism and Libertarianism.”


62. Ibid.

63. See *Aliens in America: The Strange Truth about Our Souls* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2002), 270.

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Brian Jones

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Pius XI. Divini Redemptoris, encyclical letter, March 19, 1937.


