

John Paul II in America: the Pontiff's Political Science

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Barilleaux, citing examples from Pope John Paul II's 1995 visit to the United States, argues that the pontiff is a more preeminent political scientist than most scholars believe. The pope forsakes mathematical models for a more traditional approach, emphasizing certain universal questions that preoccupied the likes of Madison and Tocqueville. John Paul's politics, according to Barilleaux, emphasize the relation of the human person to the government, the latter of which must protect and affirm the rights and freedom of the former. If the American people, however, forget that freedom and virtue are inseparable, then the American experiment will fail.

Catholics are accustomed to thinking of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ, head of the Church, a great moral teacher, and a model of Christian virtue. Non-Catholics also revere the Pontiff as a great spiritual leader and spokesman for morality in an amoral world. Even the enemies of the Catholic faith think of the Pope as a priest and theologian. None of these three groups think of John Paul II as a political scientist. Yet we can assign that title to him as well.

How Could the Pope Practice Political Science?

To characterize the Holy Father as--of all things--a political scientist is likely to raise eyebrows in several corners. Observers of the Vatican normally do not think of the Bishop of Rome as a political analyst. Despite any claims or revelations about John Paul's involvement with efforts to bring down Soviet Communism, whether before or after his election to the Chair of Peter, few would characterize Karol Wojtyla as a practitioner of political science. Nor do the Pope's writings, sermons, and speeches call to mind the sorts of analyses usually found in the *American Political Science Review*. Nevertheless, for all the novelty of thinking as such, we can identify in the words of the Holy Father a type of reasoning and teaching that can be accurately described as political science.

The Pontiff's political science is of a certain type, as I shall explain. But it is political science nonetheless, and Catholics and non-Catholics alike--specifically, Americans--can benefit from understanding what John Paul II has said about politics generally and the American political system in particular. One of the best places to find the Holy Father's words on America come from

his 1995 visit to the United States, a trip that brought John Paul to New York, New Jersey, the United Nations, and Baltimore. In several speeches and sermons, he articulated a commentary on America and the political realm that invites careful study and reflection by all people interested in the truth.¹

The Supreme Pontiff as Teacher

The Holy Father's role as teacher is a broad one. Of course, his core responsibilities involve explaining and defending the Church's teaching in matters of faith, worship, and morals. Of course, at least since Leo XIII, the popes have also exercised their role as teacher to comment on matters of political, social, and economic content. The great social encyclicals, from *Rerum Novarum* through *Evangelium Vitae*, all contain important teachings that reach beyond the core areas of faith and morals. As the fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), the Church has a "duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting in the light of the Gospel. . . ."²

As teachers, the popes have not only discussed and diagnosed the "signs of the times," but have also made predictions about what will happen if their words are not heeded. One of the best examples of these cautionary statements is Paul VI's warning in *Humanae Vitae* about the likely result of the widespread practice of artificial contraception. Pope Paul warned of a rise in the divorce rate, a breakdown of the family, of the neglect and abuse of children, of abortion and infanticide, and other evils that have become all too real in the last years of the twentieth century. The Holy Father's warnings in that letter were not merely a restatement of centuries of Catholic teaching, but an exercise in applied sociology as this teacher drew significant conclusions from the social evidence arrayed before him. That his prediction came true should not be surprising, for, as both Paul VI and John Paul II have reminded the world, the Church is an "expert in humanity"³ with a long and deep history of involvement in all aspects of human affairs.

Continuing in this tradition, Pope John Paul II has not shirked his role as teacher. Rather, he has spoken often and boldly to all mankind about the implications of the Gospel message for the political, social, and economic orders. In his 1995 address to the United Nations, he spoke explicitly of an "anthropological foundation" for his defense of the rights of nations⁴ as well as a moral and religious base. John Paul has analyzed the state of world politics, ethnic conflicts, the culture of death abroad in the West, and economic relations between the "North" and "South."

Is it too much to claim that the Pontiff has also practiced political science? Not at all. In addressing Americans about their country and culture, John Paul did more than interpret the "signs of the times." His teaching was an exercise in traditional political science.

Traditional Political Science

Several years ago, James Q. Wilson received the James Madison Award from the American Political Science Association, an honor bestowed by the organization for exemplary work in applying knowledge obtained through political science to real-world problems. In an address marking the occasion, Wilson tweaked his fellow scholars by observing that the venerable Madison would never have received the award himself. After all, Wilson pointed out, he had never published in a refereed academic journal. Wilson then went on to make several points about what is wrong with much of contemporary political science, which has forgotten its roots in a quest for mathematical models driven by a kind of "physics envy." Wilson admonished his colleagues to keep political science firmly lashed to the kinds of questions that stimulated the thinking of Madison, Tocqueville, and other practitioners of political analysis.⁵

That older mode of analysis is what is known as *traditional political science*. As James Ceaser described it an eloquent plea for its revival, "For the authors of *The Federalist* and for Tocqueville, the science of politics or political science was, in its practical sense, knowledge directed at ascertaining the factors that maintain or destroy different forms of government."⁶ This mode of analysis examines important and fundamental issues about politics in order to search for, build, and maintain a good regime in which human beings can live their lives in a manner consistent with their nature.⁷

Traditional political science consists of three main elements: a knowledge of place; a general political science of regimes; and, the political science of a particular place.⁸

1) *A Knowledge of Place*: Traditional political science is not an art of reasoning in a vacuum. Rather, it seeks knowledge within a context: historical circumstances, geography, and the character of a nation or people. A consideration of the American regime, for example, would be grounded in the history, geography, and "genius" of the American people. This context is intended to prevent the sort of abstracted reasoning that pervades exercises in women's studies, multicultural studies, and other efforts to fit all human institutions on a Procrustean bed of "race, gender, and sexual orientation."

2) *General Political Science*: A knowledge of place does not mean that traditional political science keeps its gaze to the ground and never looks toward the sun. It is also concerned with more general issues: regime types, the factors that support or undermine different regimes, and the general human nature that characterizes people in all regimes. In contrast to plastic notions of human nature found in most Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking, practitioners of traditionalism accept human nature as it is.

The general part of traditional political science looks to different types of regimes and seeks to discern the factors that help them to work or fail. It examines how human nature interacts with each regime type and what benefits

and hazards exist for people living in different types of political systems.

3) *The Political Science of a Particular Place:* The final part of traditionalism is the search for knowledge about the working of a particular regime at a particular time. It involves applying the knowledge from the first two elements to a specific place. For example, an analysis of the state of the contemporary American regime could provide cautionary insights for the citizens and policy makers of the United States.

If Ceaser is right about the basic outlines of traditional political science--and I believe that he is--then it is a mode of analysis consistent with Catholic thought. It is an application of human reasoning, but does not exalt reason, abstraction, or ideology. It can be used to apply principles of Catholic social teaching, which are employed with a sense of the context of time and place.

Pope John Paul II has reminded the faithful that the Church does not prescribe one social, political, or economic system, but rather asks how any particular system corresponds to Divine Revelation, natural law, and human nature. To the extent that a Pontiff applies Catholic teaching to the political realm, traditional political science is a method of analysis that he can employ to reach persons of goodwill both inside and outside of his flock.

Has the Pope employed the methods of traditional political science? Yes, albeit in a subtle way. The Holy Father's visit to the United States in 1995 provides ample evidence for his application of the methods of traditionalism and reminds social scientists that they have much to learn from this unlikely political scientist.

John Paul II in America, 1995

The visit of John Paul II to the United States in October, 1995, presented a good opportunity to see the Pontiff as political scientist. In many of his speeches and sermons, he spoke to crowds that were not necessarily Catholic. Indeed, on several occasions--in his arrival remarks at the Newark airport, at the United Nations, and in his departure remarks at the Baltimore airport, he explicitly recognized the secular dignitaries in his audience. Even in his great outdoor Masses--at Giants' Stadium, in New York's Central Park, at Camden Yards in Baltimore--the Holy Father spoke not only to the faithful in attendance but to a national (and global) audience as well. He always spoke in the language of faith, but he also appealed to human reason.⁹ His reasoning was consistent with the purposes and methods of traditional political science.

The general message that John Paul II brought to the United States was captured in a question that he asked in a homily given during a Mass at (perhaps ironically) Aqueduct Racetrack: "In the midst of the magnificent scientific and technological civilization of which America is proud, and especially here in Queens, in Brooklyn, in New York, is there room for the mystery of God?"¹⁰

A closer look at the Pontiff's remarks will demonstrate the depth of his political analysis.

1) *The Pontiff's Knowledge of Place*: In every public address that John Paul II gave during his visit, with the exception of his speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations and a brief talk to the Vatican mission at the U.N., the Holy Father spoke directly to the American people *as* Americans. (Even his speech to the General Assembly contained remarks appropriate to the United States.) He made explicit reference to the American context, invoking the nation's motto (*e pluribus unum*), the National Anthem, Abraham Lincoln, the Statue of Liberty, the *Baltimore Catechism*, and even the National Commission on America's Urban Families.

John Paul made clear his knowledge of place in the sense of historical era. He referred to New York City as "considered by many to be the zenith of modern civilization and progress, a symbol of America and American life."¹¹ He went on to speak of the United States' place in history: "For more than 200 years people of different nations, languages and cultures have come here. . . . America has a reputation the world over, a reputation of power, prestige and wealth."¹² Elsewhere, the Pontiff spoke of the half-century since the "incredible destruction" of World War II, remembering the Cold War, the Soviet Empire, and fall of communism. Thus, he placed his remarks firmly in time.

The Pope's words were not, however, uniformly positive. As he told President Clinton and the crowd upon his arrival, "Your country stands upon the world scene as a model of a democratic society at an advanced stage of development. Your power of example carries with it heavy responsibilities. Use it well, America! Be an example of justice and civic virtue, freedom fulfilled in goodness, at home and abroad!"¹³ The burden of his message throughout the trip was that the United States was not living up to its own ideals: "Compared to many other parts of the world, the United States is a privileged land. Yet, even here there is much poverty and human suffering. There is much need for love and the works of love; there is need for social solidarity. . . ."¹⁴

The Pontiff sought continually to remind Americans of their own traditions and national character. He talked continually of the nation's history and the "American experience." He demonstrated a familiarity with the Republic's founding, its struggles, and its symbols. Just before taking his leave at the end of the visit, he turned once again to "your own tradition."¹⁵ He invoked the fundamental documents of the United States. "I speak of your founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These documents are grounded in and embody unchanging principles of the natural law whose permanent truth and validity can be known by reason, for it is the law written by God in human hearts."¹⁶

2) *The Pontiff's General Political Science*: Appropriately for the leader of the Universal Church, Pope John Paul II also included in his remarks to Americans statements about politics in general. The context of these comments was a sense of God's providential care for humanity and His respect for the dignity of His creatures: "Yes, God holds humanity in the highest esteem! God reveres everything that is authentically human--everything that affects individuals and societies, nations and states!"¹⁷

The Holy Father reminded the United Nations that God and His Church respect human reason and tradition in the creation of political systems:

To be sure, there is no single model for organizing the politics and economics of human freedom. Different cultures and different historical experiences give rise to different institutional forms of public life in a free and responsible society. But it is one thing to affirm a legitimate pluralism of "forms of freedom," and another to deny any universality or intelligibility to the nature of man or to the human experience. . . .¹⁸

While the Church does not prescribe a particular type of regime, it teaches that the dignity of each human person must be respected by government. Man is a "creature of intelligence and free will, immersed in a mystery which transcends his own being and endowed with the ability to reflect and the ability to choose--and thus capable of wisdom and virtue."¹⁹ From this vision of humanity, the Holy Father deduces key principles that are to be used in examining the political realm. These principles include "recognition of the rights of the human person, and especially respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life in all conditions and at all stages of development."²⁰ The human person is worthy of freedom, which the Pope identifies as "the measure of man's dignity and greatness."²¹ But this freedom must be "ordered to the truth"²² so it must be used responsibly and in cooperation with natural law.

Essential to a rightly-ordered political realm is respect for the family. As John Paul told the faithful assembled at Aqueduct Racetrack,

In practical terms . . . truth tells us that there can be no life worthy of the human person without a culture--and a legal system--that honors and defends marriage and the family. The well-being of individuals and communities depends on the healthy state of the family. . . . Society must strongly reaffirm the right of the child to grow up in a family in which, as far as possible, both parents are present.²³

Moving to the forms of government, the Holy Father gives special attention to democracy. Indeed, he praises democratic government for its ability to advance many of the principles he has identified as central to human dignity. But he also cautioned Americans that "democracy needs wisdom. Democracy needs virtues, if it is not to turn against everything that it is meant to defend and

encourage. Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes."²⁴

3) *The Pontiff's Political Science of a Particular Place*: The Holy Father also focused his attention on interpreting the signs of the times for contemporary America. While American presidents have been eager to identify themselves with such a charismatic figure as John Paul II--Jimmy Carter included footage of their meeting in a 1980 campaign commercial--the Pope's message for the United States was an application of the Gospel message and his own reasoning to the state of American democracy.

John Paul found much to praise in the "extraordinary human epic that is the United States of America."²⁵ He spoke of the nation as a model for democracy in the world, praised "its own best traditions of openness and opportunity,"²⁶ reminded its citizens that they live in a "privileged land,"²⁷ and expressed his "abiding hope in America's noble destiny."²⁸

Tempering his praise, however, the Holy Father also delivered a sharp analysis of the shortcomings of the United States. He observed that "America has always wanted to be a land of the free. Today, the challenge facing America is to find freedom's fulfillment in the truth. . . ."²⁹ Truth presents a challenge for the United States precisely because the nation does not respect the fundamental dignity of the person:

When the unborn child--the "stranger in the womb"--is declared to be beyond the protection of society, not only are America's deepest traditions radically undermined and endangered, but a moral blight is brought upon society. I am also thinking of threats to the elderly, the severely handicapped and all those who do not seem to have any social usefulness. When innocent human beings are declared inconvenient or burdensome, and thus unworthy of legal and social protection, grievous damage is done to the moral foundations of the democratic community. The right to life is the first of all rights. It is the foundation of the edifice of civil society. Both as Americans and as followers of Christ, American Catholics must be committed to the defense of life in all its stages and in every condition.³⁰

Throughout his five-day visit, the Pope raised this issue again and again: nations must respect human life; despite its claims, America does not do so. He admonished citizens to be true to the ideals of the founding: "I say to you again, America, in the light of your own tradition: love life, cherish life, defend life, from conception to natural death."³¹

One of the most important sources of America's denial of the truth is its distorted notion of freedom. John Paul loves freedom, but always insisted on the traditional Catholic teaching that freedom must be ordered to the truth and that license is not liberty. "Every generation of Americans needs to know that

freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought."³²

In the prosperous democracy of the United States, a true understanding of freedom is continually threatened by "a materialistic culture and by a permissive mentality that reduces freedom to license."³³ The nation's material prosperity continually tempts Americans to lower their gaze and look only for the things of this world. As the Pontiff told the faithful at Aqueduct Racetrack, "... America's sometimes extravagant affluence often conceals much hardship and poverty. . . . From the viewpoint of the kingdom of God we must therefore ask a very basic question: have the people living in this huge metropolis lost sight of the blessings which belong to the poor in spirit?"³⁴ While it offers much in the way of material goods, American prosperity threatens to undermine democracy by drawing citizens away from the moral law upon which democracy rests.

Consistent with the Church's status as an "expert in humanity," John Paul predicted what could happen to the United States were it to continue on its present course. "Democracy cannot be sustained without a shared commitment to certain moral truths about the human person and the human community."³⁵ Not only must human dignity and rights be given lip service, but they must "have an objective content. Otherwise they correspond only to the power of the majority, or the wishes of the most vocal. If an attitude of skepticism were to succeed in calling into question even the fundamental principles of the moral law, the democratic system itself would be shaken in its foundations."³⁶

With these cautionary words, as well as a more upbeat appeal for the nation to find hope in the strength of its founding documents and moral law, John Paul II departed. His words were not merely an exercise in traditional political science, but a diagnosis of America's problems and advice for her citizens to use in seeking renewal.

The Holy Father's political science illuminates the limits of political institutions. For his message was clearly that we should not look for all of the answers to our problems in this world. That is why he asked whether there was room in American culture for the mystery of God. As he told the seminarians at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York, "The Gospel cannot be reduced to mere human wisdom. Salvation lies not in clever human words or schemes, but in the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁷

The Limits of Political Institutions

The political science of John Paul II provides an object lesson for Catholics and all Americans. It teaches us how to interpret our politics in the light of the Gospel message, to see its strengths and dangers, and to understand its limitations.

In his visit to the United States in 1995, the Holy Father warned Americans of the danger of looking for salvation in this world. "To the Church in the United States . . . I make this appeal: Do not make an idol of any temporal reality! 'Know that the kingdom of God is at hand' (cf. Lk 10:11). 'Wait for the Lord with courage; be stouthearted' (Ps 27:14). Hope in the Lord!"³⁸

For Americans, the Pope's words provided a necessary, albeit unsettling, diagnosis of the nation's ills. The United States has much of which to be proud, it has high ideals, it is founded on institutions that make it possible to respect and preserve human life and dignity. But Americans are slipping into a culture of materialism and license, and merely political solutions will not be enough to undo the damage. If the contemporary culture is built on a flight from God, then what the nation needs is a return to God. John Paul encouraged Catholic parents to form their family as "domestic church" in which "God is honored, His law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems and sufferings of everyone else."³⁹ A return to God would make possible a "culture of life" such as John Paul has discussed throughout his papacy.

The Pontiff's ultimate message is vital to political scientists and political practitioners. It is that politics is important, but prayer is more important. We must recognize our political problems, but we will not solve them unless we make room for the mystery of God.

Notes

1. The Holy Father's public addresses and homilies from this trip have been collected into a single volume, *Make Room for the Mystery of God: Visit of John Paul II to the USA, 1995* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1995). All references to page numbers for these public statements are from this volume.

2. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, 7 December 1965, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), p. 905.

3. *Veritatis Splendor*, 6 August 1993 (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media), p. 11.

4. Pope John Paul II, "Address to the U.N. General Assembly," October 5, 1995, in *Making Room . . .* op cit., p. 26.

5. James Q. Wilson, "Interests and Deliberations in the American Republic," *PS: Political Science & Politics* XXIII (December 1990): 558-562.

6. James W. Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 24. Emphasis is in the original.

7. Ceaser displays his ignorance of the Catholic Middle Ages by claiming that traditional political science was "overshadowed by religious dogmas" during that era. So much for the achievement of Aquinas. Ceaser accepts a reflexive faith-versus-reason dichotomy that marks the neo-Deism of contemporary academic thinking.

8. Ceaser, ch. 3.
9. The Holy Father continually invokes the truth as an objective reality that is not only accessible to man through Divine Revelation, but as well through the use of reason.
10. Pope John Paul, *Homily at a Mass in Aqueduct Racetrack*, Queens, New York, October 6, 1995, p. 53.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
12. *Loc. cit.*
13. Pope John Paul II, "Greetings Upon Arrival at Newark International Airport," in *Making Room . . . op cit.*, October 4, 1995, p. 9.
14. Pope John Paul II, *Homily at a Mass in Giants' Stadium*, East Rutherford, New Jersey, October 5, 1995, p. 44.
15. Pope John Paul II, *Farewell Remarks Upon Departure from Baltimore-Washington International Airport*, October 8, 1995, p. 94.
16. *Loc. cit.*
17. Pope John Paul II, *Homily at a Mass in Sacred Heart Cathedral*, Newark, New Jersey, October 4, 1995, p. 15.
18. Pope John Paul II, *Address Before the U.N. General Assembly*, October 5, 1995, p. 21.
19. *Op. cit.*, p. 22.
20. *Farewell Remarks*, p. 94.
21. *U.N. General Assembly*, p. 30.
22. *Op. cit.*, p. 31.
23. *Aqueduct Racetrack*, pp. 53-54.
24. *Farewell Remarks*, p. 93.
25. *Sacred Heart Cathedral*, p. 11.
26. *Greetings Upon Arrival*, p. 9.
27. *Giants' Stadium*, p. 44.
28. *Greetings Upon Arrival*, p. 10.
29. Pope John Paul II, *Homily at a Mass in Oriole Park*, Baltimore, Maryland, October 8, 1995, p. 89.
30. *Giants' Stadium*, p. 45.
31. *Farewell Remarks*, p. 94.
32. *Oriole Park*, p. 90.
33. *Loc. cit.*, pp. 90-1.
34. *Aqueduct Racetrack*, pp. 52-53.
35. *Oriole Park*, p. 90.
36. *Farewell Remarks*, pp. 93-94.
37. Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Seminarians During Evening Prayer at St. Joseph's Seminary*, Yonkers, New York, October 6, 1995, p. 58.
38. *Giants' Stadium*, p. 47.
39. *Aqueduct Racetrack*, p. 54.