

# THE CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALIST POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF JACQUES MARITAIN

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Throughout his life Jacques Maritain had a deep personal concern for human persons, their condition and their political well-being. He saw in *L'Action Française* a threat to spiritual life because of its excessive reliance on secular politics. In 1934 he was a signer and part author of the manifesto *Pour le Bien Commun* which deplored political divisiveness in France and urged a common stance for the poor.<sup>1</sup> He criticized the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and worked actively for a peaceful settlement and national reconciliation. He denounced the Nazi menace to civilized life. During World War II he condemned the bombing of open cities.

*Integral Humanism*, the first full presentation of his political philosophy, delineates its problems and his agenda for a Christian existentialist political ideal. There he summed up his position saying "social and political life takes place in the world of existence and of contingency, not of pure essences . . . It is a mistake to forget that essences act only in existences i.e., in ceasing to be pure essences . . . . It is no less grave an error to forget that existence is the place of essences, and that in the measure in which they are realized there, they develop their own internal energies, and their logic, while at the same time combining with other forms and with the whole historical heritage of the matter which receives them."<sup>2</sup> These fundamentals of his philosophy point to the centrality of the political virtues and to the way they relate to the changing circumstances of political life.

This paper focuses on bringing together texts relevant to his political existentialism and on the implications for political thought of the two principles of action, charity and practical wisdom, that he underlined in *Existence and Existent*.<sup>3</sup> It was in that slender volume he analyzed the metaphysical, moral and spiritual foundations on which his existential political philosophy is based.

Of charity, the first of the principles of action, he wrote: "Each of us is bound to tend toward the perfection of love according to his condition and in so far as it is in his power."<sup>4</sup> The second principle, practical wisdom,

"concerns the judgment of the moral conscience and the manner in which, at the heart of concrete existence, the appetite enters into the regulation of the moral act by the reason."<sup>5</sup>

The brief discussion of charity in the text relating to Christian morality and to persons rests on the proposition that the perfection of love is the "most existential thing in the world."<sup>6</sup> As I understand it, the secular analogue of that Christian love is civic friendship, sometimes referred to as civic amity or fraternity in Maritain's political philosophy.

In *Man and the State* Maritain said: "Justice is a primary condition for the existence of the body politic, but Friendship is its very life-giving form. It tends toward a really human and freely achieved communion. It lives in the devotion of human persons and their gift of themselves. They are ready to commit their own existence, their possessions, and their honor for its sake. The civic sense is made up of this sense of devotion and mutual love as well as of the sense of justice and law."<sup>7</sup>

Walter Lippmann, as Maritain, saw civic friendship to be fundamental to democracy. He wrote: "Democracy is a fraternity which holds men together against anything that should divide them. It calms their fevers, subdues their appetites, restrains them from believing, saying and doing those irrevocable, irresponsible things which burst asunder the bonds of affection and truth."<sup>8</sup>

In a widely acclaimed and lengthy account of *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, the American political thinker Wilson Carey McWilliams sketched a political philosophy based on a matter-of-fact ideal of fraternity. He argued that America needs a sense of direction. "The only hope for the direction . . . lies in the 'inner city' in the true sense. Such a fraternal city can exist within an unfraternal city only if men know the dangers that beset it and the possibilities it offers. To build a city around strangers, it is necessary to recognize one's fellow citizens when chance casts them in the way and to find means for affirming a national patriotism, . . . ; fraternity is a need because ultimately, beyond human imagining, all men are kinsmen and brothers."<sup>9</sup>

John Courtney Murray, S.J., in *We Hold These Truths*, approached the idea of civic amity from the viewpoint of a Catholic theologian addressing the problem of Catholics and politics in the United States.<sup>10</sup> For Father Murray civic amity is a special kind of virtue barely distinguishable from political wisdom. Civic amity, he held, is characteristic of good argument "among informed and responsible men" and "is a sentiment proper to citizens and the community's shared will to justice, though it engages the heart, and finds its measure as it finds its origin in intelligence, in a clear understanding of what is due to the good citizen from the city and the city from the citizen according to the mode of their capacity. The shared will of the community is the ground of civic amity as it is the ground of that unity

which is called peace. This unity qualified by amity is the highest good of the multitude and the perfection of its unity."<sup>11</sup>

Turning to contemporary political action, civic friendship where it exists notwithstanding belligerent modern politics which exalts power and techniques, signals a democratic willingness of the people to realize the values of freedom, justice and human rights. To the extent that nations apply human rights policies fairly abroad and honor them at home they mirror that popular willingness. Furthermore, civic friendship moves democratic nations and opponents of dictatorial rule towards the objectives of social justice and the common good. In pluralist democratic societies it creates a healthy climate for the solidarity that prompts labor, business and other groups to seek their legitimate particular goods.

Civic friendship differs from the bonds and ends of the family and of ethnic, racial, and linguistic communities, from the intellectual associations of scholars and scientists dealing with the problems of their disciplines, and from the fellowship of religious faiths.<sup>12</sup> The primary concern of civic friendship on the other hand is the realization of the common good of political society. The other types of friendship, along with that of social and economic groups serving particular goods, help to sustain popular action and the common good when they act in its spirit.

Maritain was keenly aware of the growing interdependence of nations following World War II and of the countervailing insistence of nations on absolute national sovereignty which spurred international hostilities. Because of this contradictory situation, he spoke to UNESCO in the mid 60's on "The Spiritual Conditions of Progress and Peace."<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging that there is no present likelihood of establishing a world political organization founded by the free agreement and cooperation of governments and peoples, he held it necessary to prepare for that distant prospect. By means of education and action he thought it possible that nations in time would renounce absolute national sovereignty and replace international hostility "by the faithful practice of fraternity." In an earlier commentary on world government he had proposed the establishment of an advisory world council whose only function would be to make judgments of "ethical and political wisdom."<sup>14</sup> I believe this suggestion should be given serious study.

I now propose to discuss the second principle of Maritain's existential philosophy of action, which is the virtue of practical wisdom and its counterpart, political wisdom. *Les Degres du Savoir* described practical wisdom as the most practical level of moral philosophy.<sup>15</sup> By the same token political wisdom is the most practical level of political philosophy. In *Existence and the Existent* Maritain observed that "the end of practical wisdom is not to know that which exists but to cause to exist what is not yet."<sup>16</sup> So, too, political wisdom aims at causing something new to exist.

The analyses of practical wisdom in the same volume, and that of political wisdom embedded in Maritain's political writings and more explicitly in those of Yves Simon make it plain that the two forms of wisdom are distinct but not separate. The end of practical wisdom is "the perfection of persons" whose destiny is beyond time, while political wisdom seeks to realize the common good of political society in which persons share only as long as that society endures.<sup>17</sup>

The metaphysical, epistemological and moral bases of practical wisdom are identical with those of practical wisdom described in *Existence and the Existent*.<sup>18</sup> Both concern practical judgments made by individual persons or by officials and citizens of political society. After due deliberation in given circumstances, each decides freely to adopt means worthy of achieving the ends of individual persons or the common good of political society. The means themselves, guided by norms of reason, are propelled into action by the generous good will of right inclination.

Political action normally takes the form of laws or rules, that is, of constitutions, legislation, policies, and executive, judicial, administrative, or electoral decisions. All of them concern practical judgments about existing problems facing political society. If they are shaped by political wisdom, their value will be measured by the degree to which they contribute to the common good. If, on the contrary, they prove to be unwise, procedures especially in democratic countries provide for their revision and improvements in which political wisdom may be able to prevail. Happily, there are also many wise laws born of past or present wisdom. For example, the two hundred year old Constitution of the United States, its provisions for change and the democratic climate it created, are rightly regarded as a classical model of political wisdom. That wisdom is evident not only because it has endured but essentially because it expressed in the words of its preamble the goals of justice, peace, defense, public welfare, and the security "of the blessings of freedom for ourselves and our posterity."

Political wisdom directs our attention to the practical significance of the common good as the highest ideal of democracy, which is to serve freedom, human rights, and social justice. The historical dynamics of political freedom and human rights vested in citizens by law have enfranchised the people and promise them an increasingly effective role in future governments. Social justice is the driving force that undertakes to distribute the fruits of the common good equitably among persons according to their needs. This distribution already under way in democracies assuages human fears and assures the durability and progress of political life.

Concretely, as Maritain noted, the common good includes more than important public service operations including roads, bridges, schools, and defense and health programs. Beyond them, it encompasses such goods as the rule of law, sound customary practices, effective political institutions, historical memories and the development of moral and political virtues.<sup>19</sup>

If political wisdom is to assist officials and citizens to decide on the good use of means for attaining the common good, they must begin, prior to a final decision, to undertake an exacting intellectual procedure. The first step in the process is the gathering of facts relevant to the specific circumstances in which action is to be taken. Following the sorting out of available means, advice should be sought from experts and other persons of recognized wisdom. They too should be consulted about the likely consequences of several proposed means. Such deliberations protect against governmental inefficiency, arrogance, and excessive secrecy, to produce better judgments.<sup>20</sup>

Political wisdom realistically understands that progress towards justice and the common good produced by the good use of power and technology by democratic governments will take place gradually and over a long time. The reason for this realism, Maritain maintained, is that historically the human condition produces a double movement of good and evil in which the justice of political life has to work its way "through its own causality toward welfare and success in the future."<sup>21</sup> Wise decisions, too, may be delayed because of the variety of valuable means from among which men of good will can rightly choose in order to achieve the common good.<sup>22</sup>

Given the increasing human awareness of the importance of world affairs and of practical truths about the common life of the people of all nations, Maritain held that nations, despite divergent ideological reasons for acknowledging human rights, could agree on a draft list of human rights. He went on to state that other agreements among nations "can be achieved not on common speculative notions . . . but on the affirmation of the same set of convictions concerning action." He added that however little these agreements may produce, they represent a basis for common action.<sup>23</sup>

In fact the United States during the 60's opened the closed door of communist China's society by exchanging table tennis teams and later agreeing to establish diplomatic relations, limited scientific and cultural exchanges, and trade and travel arrangements. In 1987 the United States and the Soviet Union reached an agreement setting up a network of communications designed to reduce the risks of accidental nuclear war. Later this year the ideological rivalry between the two powers may be tentatively set aside in favor of a practical mutual reduction of all short and medium range missiles. Although it will be a small percentage of the total 40,000 nuclear weapons presently in the possession of both nations, it concluded the agreement would be the first nuclear arms reduction ever agreed upon.

For democratic nations the decisive choices of political wisdom must frequently be made between the good and better ways of social, economic, and political life. This situation has arisen as the choice of available technologies for better living multiply, while the number of people failing to

share equitably in national and international well-being has steadily increased.

The choices between the good and the better are well illustrated in the letter of the American Catholic Bishops on the U. S. economy. The bishops recognized and applauded the many good elements of America's technological economy including its respect for private property, its ability to provide food and other consumer goods on a large scale, and the generosity of its people. But for the millions of poor and the near-poor here and abroad the nation's prosperity is flawed. Their letter addressed a task of political wisdom when it offered practical judgments on appropriate means of applying moral and theological principles related to economic life. The measures they proposed intended to improve economic life were presented publicly after careful studies and discussions with lay experts. The letter explains the nature of their judgments in the following remarks: "Our judgments and recommendations on specific economic issues . . . do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching; the former are related to circumstances which can change or which can be interpreted differently by people of good will."<sup>24</sup> In democratic societies recommendations such as those voiced by the bishops contribute to the fund of political society's political wisdom once accepted by officials and the people. Their consensus becomes a precedent on which future generations can build in accordance with their own insights.

Political wisdom speaks to the fundamental problem of ends and means because it obliges political decision-makers freely to choose means of achieving the ends of justice, the common good, and the dignity of the human person. The primary principle of political wisdom for Maritain is that "means must be proportionate and appropriate to the end, since they are the ways to the end and, so to speak, the end itself in the very process of coming into existence."<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion of the moral rationalization of politics he challenged the contemporary tendency to rely upon "non-moral and successful politics: the art of conquering and keeping power by any means whatsoever."<sup>26</sup> On the contrary he said that the application of good means to attain the common good advances that good, but the employment of evil means will fail in the long run to do so.<sup>27</sup>

The contemporary problem of nuclear deterrence as a means of keeping the peace is one of the most crucial and complex issues involving the moral rationalization of international politics. Those who favor a policy that accepts deterrence conditionally as a fact of life insist upon the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons. They also believe that no good use can be made of such technologies. Clearly this position has yet to persuade the major powers to agree to total nuclear disarmament for all time and to abandon "Star Wars," and chemical and biological weapons.

The general debate on deterrence policy and on war and peace tends to focus on the technological and strategic aspects of their problems and less on the profound moral principles and their practical applications for peace. Public interest would be well served if the pastoral message in Part IV of the American Catholic Bishops' letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, were better known and understood.<sup>28</sup> Maritain's discussion of the moral rationalization of politics and of its spiritual implications, in *Man and the State*, would broaden and deepen popular education in the making of judgments about war and peace and their existential dimensions.<sup>29</sup>

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The virtues of civic friendship and political wisdom have a central place in Maritain's democratic philosophy but they are simply components of his architectonic philosophy of political life. Over 50 years he systematically studied and wrote about the principles, practices, and problems of political society. Thus he analyzed the significance of human nature, natural law, and the person, and his rights and obligations in political society. His treatment of that society, its government, people, and communities, gave a fresh insight into democratic politics as did his invaluable studies of freedom, equality, religion and politics, education and the social and economic aspects of politics.

Maritain's political philosophy is indivisibly united with his metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of history, and Christian moral philosophy. That political philosophy is a prophetic discernment of a practical Christian democratic ideal of human freedom, of the people's role in political society, and of the existential effects of the virtues on national and international political life.

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## NOTES

1. *Pour le Bien Commun* (Paris, 1934) a manifesto.
2. J. Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, transl. by J. Evans (Notre Dame, 1973) pp. 219-220.
3. J. Maritain, *Existence the and Existent*, transl. by L. Galantiere and G. Phelan (New York, 1956) p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
7. J. Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago, 1951) p. 10.
8. I have been unable to find the source for this quotation which I had jotted down years ago.
9. W. McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, 1973) pp. 623-624.
10. J. Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York, 1960).
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
12. J. Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, transl. by H. Binsse (New York, 1941) pp. 115-140. This essay relates only to the fellowship of religious faiths.
13. J. Maritain, *Approches Sans Entraves* (Paris, 1973) pp. 244-246.
14. *Man and the State*, pp. 214-217.
15. J. Maritain, *Les Dègres du Savoir*, nouvelle edition (Paris, 1942) pp. 884-885.
16. *Existence and the Existent*, p. 58.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
18. *Ibid.*, See also the analysis of pre-philosophical knowledge in J. Maritain, *Challenges and Renewals*, eds. J. Evans and L. Ward (Notre Dame, 1968) pp. 229-238. The two books of Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* and *The Political Life of Children* (Boston, 1986), present case studies of his conversations with 7-12-year-old children living around the world which appear to support Maritain's thesis of pre-philosophical knowledge.
19. J. Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, 1946) pp. 52-54.
20. *Prudence Chrtienne* (Paris, 1948) pp. 208-210. These pages are part of a discussion of political wisdom as a special branch of Christian prudence.
21. *Challenges and Renewals*, pp. 357-362, re the double movement of history. *Man and the State*, p. 57, is the source of the quotation.
22. Y. Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (Notre Dame, 1980) p. 40, and Y. Simon, "The Study of Practical Wisdom," *New Scholasticism*, XXXV (1961) 29-30.
23. *Man and the State*, pp. 77-78.
24. American Catholic Bishops' Letter, "Justice for all," *Catholic Telegraph* (Cincinnati, November, 1986) par. 135.
25. *Man and the State*, pp. 77-78.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
27. *Ibid.*, 56-60.

28. American Catholic Bishops' Letter, "The Challenge of Peace," *Origins* (Washington, D.C., 1983) 12, no. 20. pp. 322-325.
29. *Man and the State*, pp. 58-71.