

*Jacques Maritain  
and Alasdair MacIntyre:  
The Person, the Common Good  
and Human Rights*

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Catholicism and liberalism represent two distinct traditions in social theory, traditions which have a complex and varied relationship. Over the past century and a half, Catholic views toward liberalism have shifted from near total opposition to critical appreciation. More recently, despite great foundational differences, we have seen from both sides a growing recognition of their common concerns. For instance, the concern for the poor shared by welfare state liberals such as John Rawls parallels the long-standing Catholic commitment to serve the needs of the poor. Nevertheless, substantial tensions between the two approaches remain.

For the purposes of this paper, liberalism refers to those tenets of social thought, originating with Hobbes and Locke, which view the human person as an autonomous agent who constructs his or her identity through independently chosen pursuits. Liberal political structures aim to protect private goods and maintain a neutral stance toward varying conceptions of the good. They do not seek to define a common good or acknowledge a transcendent human purpose for fear of imposing a notion of *the* good and compromising human freedom.

Within liberalism freedom is defined in terms of an individual's freedom to choose without being restricted or restrained by an objective order or a communal authority. In varying degrees, liberal theorists insist upon protecting the individual from communal infringement. More egalitarian liberals, such as Rawls, believe that community participation and cooperation are sustainable in a liberal society. More libertarian liberals, such as Robert Nozick, prioritize individual autonomy and a laissez-faire governance.

This liberal understanding of human freedom and autonomy, which is so

enormously influential in our political culture, contrasts very sharply with the much more communitarian understanding of the human person and of human freedom that is characteristic of Catholic social thought. As a result, many commentators, both Catholic and non-Catholic (e.g., William Lee Miller) have recently suggested that the notion in Catholic social teaching of “personalistic communitarianism”<sup>1</sup> can serve as a needed curb upon the excesses of the liberal individualism now dominant in our culture. Yet, at the same time, others voice skepticism about the Catholic Church’s ability to offer a distinctive and deeply challenging message for today’s public sphere because Catholic social teaching in the twentieth century has increasingly expressed its prophetic vision in forms that overlap with the common parlance of liberal culture. A primary example of this overlap appears with the adoption of rights language by Catholic theorists, language which is even becoming prominent in Catholic social encyclicals.

Consequently, while most Catholic theorists agree with the substance of the moral claims made in these encyclicals, division abounds regarding the possibility of constructing a coherent theoretical basis for Catholic rights language given the central role rights language plays in liberal political theory. Numerous scholars, among them Jacques Maritain, have attempted to develop the distinctively Catholic presuppositions which undergird a Catholic advocacy of human rights. Others, however, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, find this project of rooting human rights in a distinctively Catholic vision of the person, society and the common good, to be flawed from the very start due to theoretical inconsistencies. To clarify this debate and its underlying issues, I will first present Maritain’s theory of rights, and then turn to MacIntyre’s objection to the use of rights language. Finally, I will briefly consider the validity of developing a conception of human rights from a natural law framework and offer my tentative assessment of the contributions of Maritain and MacIntyre for the challenges that the rights debate and liberalism present to Catholic social theory.

Maritain’s political and social vision called for a new social order marked by a plurality of cultures governed by democratic principles and animated by the Christian spirit. Maritain hoped for a “personalist” democracy that would curb individualism without being totalitarian, advocate human rights vehemently as integral to the common good, and promote human freedom in conjunction with virtue. Central to this personalist democracy was the principle of subsidiarity which would foster a rich array of intermediate organizations to encourage personal initiative and local action.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> While Maritain recognized that the principle of subsidiarity could function in political systems other than democracy, as it did in the Middle Ages, he believed that for our times,

To clarify Maritain's enthusiasm for democracy and his harsh criticism of "bourgeois liberalism" it is important for us to make a distinction here between constitutional democracy and liberal democracy. Today, we tend to use these terms more or less interchangeably, but this linguistic usage can be deceptive. For constitutional democracy, which really began to emerge in the late eighteenth century, is characterized by a representative system of limited government whereby elected officials remain accountable to a relatively broad electoral body that votes regularly. Constitutional democracy includes executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Citizens, by virtue of their dignity, are guaranteed equal basic rights and liberties such as the right to vote, freedom of speech and association, etc. As an historical matter, constitutional democracy sprang primarily, but not exclusively, from liberalism. But natural law principles and the famous Gelasian principle are also part of its underpinning. Liberal democracy, meanwhile, refers more specifically to democratic systems that are shaped largely by liberal theorists ranging from Hobbes and Locke to John Rawls and Robert Nozick, in which a framework of individual rights and the freedom of the individual from the authority of the state are primary concerns. Liberal democracies are constitutional, but constitutional democracies are liberal in varying degrees. The distinction between constitutional and liberal democracies is important, for I shall argue that the enthusiasm of Catholicism for democracy, especially prominent since Vatican II, is inspired by the principles of constitutional democracy, and not by liberalism.

Ironically, it was in the United States, one of the most liberal of democracies in the Western Hemisphere, that Maritain saw possibilities for a rapprochement between St. Thomas' natural law and certain liberal aspirations to equality and freedom. Because Maritain believed that democracy, particularly in America, was rooted ultimately in Christian principles, he hoped that American democracy could be reconstituted and could renounce much of its liberal political background. Maritain sought to purify American democracy, inculcating a "democracy of the person" in place of American liberalism; he did not see the United States as inextricably tied to this liberalism. Maritain argued, for instance, that "bourgeois liberalism" corrupted human rights theory by divorcing it from its true source in Christian natural law principles.<sup>3</sup> It was Maritain's conviction that the modern discovery of rights was part of an evolution in the modern moral conscience which identified previously unseen dimensions of the natural

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democracy was most properly suited to the embodiment of subsidiarity.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (New York: Gordian Press, 1971), p. 81.

law.<sup>4</sup> In other words, for Maritain, human rights belonged more properly to the Catholic social tradition, and liberalism had simply corrupted an idea which had always been inherent in Thomas' natural law principles.

Although Maritain recognized that Thomas himself did not develop a theory of rights, he believed that theorists such as Locke helped illumine the wider implications of Thomas' natural law theory. In *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (1943), Maritain set out to explain that human rights have their proper grounding in Thomas' principles of natural law. His argument runs as follows. Thomas acknowledged that certain goods from the community are due to persons *as members of a community*. For Thomas, what is due to particular persons and what is owed by particular persons derive from the person's social nature and role in society. A person's social role serves the common good understood as the set of social conditions necessary for fostering the proper good of each person and the overall flourishing of the society. Needless to say, duties are primary to Thomas' understanding of just social relations. Individuals are principally expected to do their duty, not clamor for their "rights." In the natural law framework, duties are active and the implied "rights" (or entitlements) are passive because their legitimacy depends upon the prior fulfillment of one's duties and the requirements of justice. The virtue of justice requires a giving of rewards due to persons according to their role in community.

Maritain followed Thomas in considering a person's natural and supernatural end before determining what is owed to or due from that person. In other words, he did not posit an "unencumbered self," to borrow Michael Sandel's phrase;<sup>5</sup> rather, the person's temporal end of happiness and the person's supernatural end of eternal bliss with God determine and shape the rights Maritain assigned to the human person. Maritain, however, departed from Thomas in that he does not also consider the full extent of a person's social bonds before determining that certain rights are due to that person. In other words, Maritain assigned rights to persons before identifying their social and historical context and the role they play in their communal setting. It is from this pre-political state, "from the simple fact that man is man,"<sup>6</sup> that Maritain developed a set of fundamental, primordial rights which are possessed by each individual.

Maritain developed a rights theory whereby rights fall into three different classes: first, primordial rights derive *directly* and *necessarily* from natural law; secondly, rights of the law of nations derive *necessarily* from the natural law

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Sandel describes the Rawlsian conception of person as an "unencumbered self" because the self is hypothetically considered prior to his or her ends. See his "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12 (1984), pp. 85-86.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, p. 63.

given certain conditions; and thirdly, rights of positive law are *contingently* derived from the natural law.<sup>7</sup> It is Maritain's description of primordial rights which seems to be in particular conflict with Aquinas' natural law framework. "[P]rimordial rights" exist on account of our eternal end in God and our initial membership in a family but prior to our incorporation into civil society. These primary, fundamental rights take precedence over duties to the common good, for they are not granted by society but are recognized as integral to human dignity.<sup>8</sup> Primordial rights include the right to life and the right to religious liberty. They give a person the right to transcend social duties and the temporal common good in order to follow his or her conscience. Thus if there happens to be a conflict between the voice of conscience understood as God's will and familial or social obligations, the voice of conscience comes first. Here Maritain implies that human dignity can be secured apart from civil connections.

In this regard, Maritain's attempt to adapt the liberal theory of natural rights to natural law inadvertently resembles the Lockean view of the individual in the state of nature, that is, in an abstract existence prior to membership in civil society. Maritain did not go as far as the Lockean view for he makes a distinction between his idea of the pre-political person and the idea of the pre-social person in Locke. Yet the danger in this distinction is the suggestion that one's social bonds to family are natural whereas one's connection to the wider society is constructed or artificial. The very notion that primordial rights exist in the "primordial society" or "the family," prior to the larger political community, which can limit rights, seems to set up a false separation between one's social nature and one's political ties to the wider society.

Generally Maritain regarded human rights as correlative with moral obligations. Both rights and duties are rooted in the dignity of the person who is a spiritual whole made for God. In *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (1943), he explained,

If man is morally bound to the things which are necessary to the fulfillment of his destiny, obviously, then, he has the right to fulfill his destiny; and if he has the right to fulfill his destiny he has the right to the things necessary for this purpose.<sup>9</sup>

For instance, parents are "morally bound" to provide for their children. It then follows that they have a right to work in order to fulfill this duty.

In contrast to Locke and Hobbes, Maritain developed an understanding of

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 65, 81-82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

rights as primarily positive entitlements for fostering the common good and human fulfillment. Rights for Maritain are substantive claims for human expansion and development which enable the individual to contribute to the good of the whole. For this reason, Maritain expanded the scope of rights to include families, workers and even the Catholic Church. Locke and the liberal tradition, on the other hand, claim that rights are immunities, originating in the human will, which protect individuals from communal interference and death. Liberal expressions of rights tend to be defensive and protective in nature. Thus the liberal tends to stress "freedom from . . .," whereas Maritain spoke of "freedom for . . ."

By grounding human rights in the natural law's teleological world-vision, Maritain established an objective standard by which to govern the exercise of rights and to judge between competing rights claims. Modern rights, in contrast, stand alone without this grounding in an objective order and without any connection to communal duties. Such freestanding modern rights cannot be prioritized according to the values of a community, as Maritain's theory of rights established, but become altogether sacred and inviolable possessions of the human will.

In contributing to the U.N. Declaration of Universal Human Rights in 1948, Maritain recognized the need for the world to achieve agreement about universal moral standards. He believed that the horrors of the Second World War called for a notion of natural law that was more precise in its practical implications. Maritain did not pursue theoretical agreement, for he recognized the irreconcilable ideological differences that divide nations, and he feared an authoritarian imposition of ideas. In an essay entitled, "On the Philosophy of Human Rights," (1949) Maritain wrote,

[I]t would be quite useless to seek for a common rational justification of those practical conclusions and rights. That way lies the danger either of seeking to impose an arbitrary dogmatism, or of finding the way barred at once by irreconcilable divisions.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, Maritain advocated practical agreement on basic human rights and accepted the probability that individuals would offer varying reasons for agreeing to these rights. Ideally, Maritain hoped for a deeper unity among people based on natural law principles and Christian inspiration. He remained certain that the natural law was at the root of all human efforts to establish universal standards of behavior, and as a political philosopher he continued to articulate this concept

<sup>10</sup> Maritain, "On the Philosophy of Human Rights," in *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations*, Ed., UNESCO, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 72.

of natural law as the only true and solid foundation for human rights. He did not want his theoretical views to be imposed, but neither did he want them to be excluded from public discussion.

In making his case for universal human rights, Maritain explained that each soul has an eternal value and an absolute dignity. Only God, then, has an absolute claim on the human person. Maritain followed Thomas in holding that God's will takes precedence over political duties, which in turn take precedence over private interests. In this hierarchy it is crucial that one does not confuse a personal, private desire with the will of God in one's life, a distinction that is not always easy to make.

In a critical response to Maritain's endorsement of universal human rights, MacIntyre observes that the search for universal agreement about basic moral norms is a phenomenon emerging from isolated, community-deprived individuals who have lost their way in the moral life.<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre maintains that those who advocate universal rights insist upon illusory, context-transcending claims that reflect a desperation to understand and govern their moral lives. MacIntyre argues that the theory of universal human rights is wrong on at least three counts. First, it posits a false notion of the human person as an autonomous individual<sup>12</sup> whose rights are grounded in an elusive dignity which overlooks the teleological nature of the human being whose dignity is fundamentally a dynamic, socially-embedded reality. MacIntyre teaches that the thoroughly social nature of human beings makes the concept of human dignity intelligible only as a relational term. In other words, human dignity cannot be posited of autonomous individuals. Secondly, MacIntyre points out that the intense individualism, implied by universal rights, narrows the very nature of morality which depends upon the traditions and social relations integral to a person's identity and worth.<sup>13</sup> Universal rights distort morality by abstracting it from the concrete historical communities in which it functions.

MacIntyre considers the moral life from within a community animated by a shared tradition with specific ends. Although international solidarity continues to progress, MacIntyre suggests that a real international community has yet to form as a concrete context for moral living. MacIntyre argues that moral principles must be heeded, not because they are universally valid, but because they compel individuals to act according to their natural desires and their moral end as learned in community. They are to be heeded because they can be

<sup>11</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, "Community, Law and the Idiom and Rhetoric of Rights," *Listening 26* (1991), p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 105.

actualized in the concrete, community context, where one can come to appreciate the overlapping and collaborative nature of the person and the common good. MacIntyre concurs with Thomas' view of morality as a communal endeavor requiring the use of practical reason among those pursuing the virtuous life.

Thirdly, MacIntyre observes that rights language tends to short-circuit and block genuine dialogue about moral standards. With rights language moral convictions are expressed in disproportionate ways. For example, rights language puts emphasis upon the individual and the government to the exclusion of intermediary institutions such as families, schools and churches.<sup>14</sup> By defending self-interest against other individuals and community groups, rights claims encourage opposition and fragmentation rather than cooperation. They foster distrust and antagonism. Disagreements about rights cannot be rationally debated because, often phrased in absolute terms, they are frequently turned over to the adversarial polemics of a legal dispute.

MacIntyre sees rights language as emerging from the breakdown of trust among competing parties in moral discourse and from the loss of an independent moral standard in modern society. He charges that the adoption of rights language in Catholic social teaching indirectly caters to the terms and categories of our fragmented liberal society. The use of rights language also involves an indirect acceptance of its modern presuppositions which contradict the social nature of human beings and the virtue of justice essential to the common good and human fulfillment.<sup>15</sup> In other words, for MacIntyre, rights language cannot be extricated from the liberal framework where it took root.

MacIntyre recommends that we refrain from all conventional forms of public debate and seek to apply the Aristotelian/Thomistic conception of justice to our contemporary context. He suggests that we construct and maintain communities where the moral life can be sustained through a coherent, comprehensive vision of the good. First, "[w]e need to show as well as to say what an adequate conception of justice amounts to, by constructing the types of institutionalized social relationships within which it becomes visible."<sup>16</sup> Secondly, "disagreements have to be formulated in concrete terms at the level of practice"<sup>17</sup> so that disagreements are regulated by the goods of the community. Furthermore, the community's tradition must remain open to self-criticism and to the selective absorption of new knowledge from outside that tradition. In this way, communities can take their history and social circumstances seriously while

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

upholding a standard of truth. Independent of the community's desires and preferences, this standard of truth, which regulates the "absorption" of new ideas, can allow for accountability, sound judgment and the genuine assimilation of new ideas.

The least Thomistic element of MacIntyre's objections to rights language involves his attack on claims to universal truth as such. Yet Thomas' natural law maintains that there are universal truths that are naturally known by *all* rational creatures.<sup>18</sup> Thomas did not shy away from universal absolutes; rather his natural law theory argues that truth exists beyond one's particular social context, and that moral absolutes are not strictly bound to historical communities. Thomas' believed that transhistorical and transcultural truths exist and make possible an objective order by which justice is measured. MacIntyre, however, is right to point out that Thomas would never have given universal moral truth claims the specificity they possess in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, Thomas' objection would *not* have been that morality is strictly a local affair, so that universal moral claims can only be abstract and meaningless.

MacIntyre's more Thomistic and penetrating critique of Maritain's theory of rights is based on his objection that rights language tends to be individualistic and self-seeking. Rights language does not give the primacy to duty or responsibility to community which is so prominent in Thomas' natural law framework. From a natural law perspective, duties could imply rights but rights do not always imply duties; this is the difficulty with speaking of rights apart from or prior to duties. MacIntyre argues that the human rights theory tends to emphasize individual freedoms and private interests over the traditionally Catholic emphases on virtue, duty, and the common good. Giving primacy to rights necessarily erodes Catholic notions of responsibility, for people are more naturally inclined to demand what is their due before they fulfill their duties to others. Thus, a greater emphasis upon virtue and duty is a crucial corrective to the perennial human tendency to favor self-interest over self-sacrifice for the community. And so, from a Thomistic perspective, the problem with universal human rights is neither the claim to universal truth, nor the generality of universal moral standards, but the emphasis on human rights as individual possessions divorced from the duties which are most fundamental to human society.

Although MacIntyre does not delve into a specific critique of Maritain's theory, he gives us sufficient reason to question Maritain's notion of primordial rights, a notion which seems to compromise Maritain's own understanding of human beings as fundamentally social. While most of the rights Maritain

<sup>18</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, q.57, art. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

proposed (rights derived from the law of nations and positive law) grew out of a social context and correlate with duties, he stated that primordial rights exist solely by virtue of one's existence as a human being and do not entail bonds to the larger community. He assigned rights to a pre-political person who is socially bound to family but not to civil society. Although Maritain was not clear about the status of the pre-political person, by grounding rights in the simple fact of a person's humanity, he resembles his liberal opponents, who advocate rights based on a conception of human beings where human beings *possess* rights prior to any substantive social roles or attributes. Maritain's conception of the pre-political person seems to contradict his description of the community as the locus of human identity and development. It does not correspond with his opposition to the "liberal-individualistic type of society" which acknowledges pre-political rights and upholds human autonomy.

Furthermore, Maritain's insistence upon the absolute character of primordial rights does not cohere with his acknowledgment that all rights are subject to limitation if special needs arise in the body politic. To make this point, Maritain distinguished between "possessing" and "exercising" rights. One may possess a right, but the exercise of that right is qualified by the community. In *Man and the State* (1951), he wrote:

[Natural rights] are inalienable since they are grounded on the very nature of man, which of course no man can lose. This does not mean that they reject by nature any limitation or that they are the infinite rights of God. Just as every law, notably the natural law on which they are grounded, aims at the common good, so human rights have an intrinsic relation to the common good.<sup>19</sup>

This suggestion that the common good may put limits upon primordial rights suggests that primordial rights are not inalienable rights, and that they do not really exist prior to the larger political society. To illustrate this inconsistency, consider Maritain's regard for the "right of conscience"<sup>20</sup> (or religious freedom) as "the most basic and inalienable of all human rights."<sup>21</sup> Maritain explained that the "right of conscience" is absolute but he also acknowledged that the state, for instance, has the right to punish a person if her conscience leads her to commit a criminal act.<sup>22</sup> Again, Maritain distinguished between possessing and

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> See Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, p. 77.

exercising rights. Though a person still possesses the right of conscience, the person cannot exercise that right with absolute freedom. But if the exercise of primordial rights can be restricted by civil legislation for the sake of some good such as public order, then absolute primordial rights are not absolute at all. They are not essentially distinct from civil rights which depend upon membership in a political community and are subject to the demands of the common good.<sup>23</sup>

Maritain appreciated the liberal aspirations to human freedom, rights, and equality as true and indispensable for political life. He did not wholly succeed, however, in incorporating these themes into a natural law framework. Thomas' philosophy does not contain the notion of a pre-communal, pre-political self with entitlements independent of political society. Thus, to the extent that Maritain proposed natural rights which exist prior to one's community bonds, he is not faithful to Thomas' natural law theory. For Thomas, an individual would be due something according to justice as defined in terms of the common good. The common good has clear priority for Thomas. Thus it is impossible to specify what is due to a person apart from the communal order and the role of particular members within that order. This natural law framework stressed one's obligations to community more than one's entitlements because a person's rights depend upon the fulfillment of prior duties.

MacIntyre is right in pointing out that Thomas' natural law provided only general principles for morality. More specific applications of his principles were left up to individual prudential judgments within particular social structures. Although the virtue of prudence was central to this process, Thomas is vague about exactly how one moves from natural law principles to the practical application of those principles. Maritain did not seek to preserve this flexibility, generality, and open-endedness in natural law. After the Second World War, he believed that natural law needed to be more explicitly spelled out so that permanent universal moral norms could establish a universal world order which would guard the whole of humanity against "racialist and fascist perversion."<sup>24</sup> In so far as Maritain tried to establish rights as set moral standards he may have compromised some of the dynamism and freedom in natural law which allows room for individuals to consider the details of their social context and exercise prudence more fully.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Michelle Watkins and Ralph McInerney, "Jacques Maritain and the Rapprochement of Liberalism and Communitarianism," in *Catholicism, Liberalism and Communitarianism*, eds. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), pp. 168-9.

<sup>24</sup> Maritain, "On the Philosophy of Human Rights," p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Maritain's efforts to revive and specify natural law theory were part of a larger revival of interest in natural law theory that came about during the Nuremberg trials. E. Mensch

However, Maritain remained true to natural law in seeking universal moral standards that need not be abstract, as MacIntyre claims, but can be rooted in our common human nature. Pursuit of this common moral wisdom is necessary for establishing a minimal standard of global moral accountability in the face of atrocities like the holocaust of World War II and the more recent genocidal slaughter in Bosnia. To neglect this universalizing dimension of the moral life is to deprive the fragmented but increasingly interdependent world of today with desperately needed norms. Given modern pluralism, natural law's affirmation of our common capacity to reason must be acknowledged as a primary resource for the maintenance of common goals within a wider society and among nations.

MacIntyre's critique of universal moral principles and his insistence on keeping morality at the local level seems to betray the natural law belief that there is an unwritten law in the hearts of all people (*Romans 2:25*). In fact, evidence of natural law can be found in the current global endorsement of a common set of human rights in the constitutions of 157 countries.<sup>26</sup> The fact that people of radically different cultural and religious traditions, with differences of theological and metaphysical belief, agree surprisingly well about certain forms of human behavior does represent more than a manifestation of the modern Western encyclopaedist mindset, as MacIntyre would have it. Furthermore, seeking global communication and collaboration is part of the Christian mission to find continuity between Christian claims and the working of the Holy Spirit within the larger public order. Maritain's efforts to affirm a universal truth and to solidify universal moral norms are witness to the Catholic social mission, a mission which demands that we try to achieve mutual understanding, cooperation, and common ground on a global scale.

Despite Maritain's failure to ground human rights in natural law, he recognized the world's need for universal moral norms. The problem with rights language as the means to articulate universal moral norms is its seemingly inseparable association with the individualistic view of the human person espoused by liberal philosophy. Rather than completely dismissing liberal political structures, Maritain rightly affirmed some of its positive outcomes, such as political liberty, freedom of thought, and economic prosperity for a vast majority of citizens. This is a profound achievement. Yet the church community must speak out and work for justice with those marginalized in our society and

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and A. Freeman, *The Politics of Virtue: Is Abortion Debatable?* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> See Max Stackhouse, "Alasdair MacIntyre: Overview and Evaluation," *Religious Studies Review* 18 (July, 1992), p. 207.

cut off from these liberal fruits. Maritain and MacIntyre both remind us that one of the central problems with nonvoluntary poverty is that it hinders a person's communal participation.<sup>27</sup> It cuts off the basic human desire to contribute to a whole larger than one's self. Poverty inhibits communal connections and the self-giving participation in society, which makes possible the realization of our highest human capacities. Thus the work of justice cannot limit its task to advocating rights for the narrow liberal goals of material betterment and economic prosperity. The Catholic social vision must recognize that limiting social justice to the liberal "quality of life" standard neglects the spiritual, creative, and fundamentally social dimensions of the human person which are integral to individual human fulfillment and to a healthy communal life.

While liberal societies, such as the United States, satisfy many of the material demands of human dignity, the distinctive cultural and moral depravity in liberal societies wears away at individual worth and weighs down the pursuit of higher human ends. A liberal society does not really embrace neutrality but prioritizes liberal values, as well as profit, status, and technological advancement over what Maritain would call integral human development. Thus people become narrowly regarded as objects for sexual pleasure, consumer manipulation, or political advantage. These de-humanizing aspects of the liberal ethos call us to question whether more liberal democracies, on the whole, advance human freedom and fulfillment. Thus I believe MacIntyre correctly challenges rights language which is so tied to liberalism's individualistic vision of the human person. Consider for example, how materialism, self-centeredness, racism, sexual exploitation, abortion, and political manipulation abound in American culture. These problems indicate the extent of our moral, cultural and spiritual poverty. If we, as Christians, take seriously human dignity and our deep social connections and responsibilities we must go beyond a language that prioritizes personal autonomy and material prosperity to one that emphasizes that material well-being is only a means to the development of our moral, intellectual and spiritual gifts.

Despite their differences regarding universal human rights, Maritain and MacIntyre both agree that the most essential and vital task of the political life takes place among the people we live and work with on a daily basis. Maritain wrote, "The basic political reality is not the State, but the body politic with its multifarious institutions, the multiple communities which it involves and the moral community which grows out of it."<sup>28</sup> Maritain believed that the life-

<sup>27</sup> See MacIntyre, "Community, Law and the Idiom and Rhetoric of Rights," p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, p. 202.

blood of any society is its intermediary organizations such as churches, schools, universities, and community groups.

It is my contention that it is principally these “pillars of society” that must express the prophetic and unsettling Catholic social vision by illuminating the needs and desires naturally imbedded in the hearts of those they serve. These organizations could enrich and elevate the tone of our public conversation and offer a tremendous contribution to our moral and cultural development by leading people to identify their deepest yearnings so that they look beyond material gain and economic expediency to the more lasting values of God, family, friendship and moral excellence. Intermediate organizations must take responsibility for our cultural slumber and awaken us from our ignorance and indifference toward our most distinctly human capabilities.

In sum, one of Maritain’s great contributions, echoed and qualified in the work of MacIntyre, and desperately needed today, is his recognition that the political task is more about moral and spiritual progress than material progress. Maritain wrote,

The political task towards which all this must tend is the good human life of the multitude, the betterment of the conditions of human life itself, the internal improvement and the progress—material, of course, but also and principally moral and spiritual.<sup>29</sup>

He observes further,

[The] work of education, taming the irrational to reason, and developing the moral virtues, must constantly be pursued within the political body.<sup>30</sup>

In short, the political task, for Maritain, is essentially “a task of civilization and culture.”<sup>31</sup>

Maritain understood that intermediate groups are central to this political task, and rightly believed that it is among intermediate groups that the Church’s social teachings can be encouraged and lived. However, MacIntyre’s work soberly reminds us of the radical challenge of the Church’s social vision for those living amidst organizations and systems that are deeply imbedded in the tradition of modern liberalism.

<sup>29</sup> Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.