Here is liberalism unabashed: the exalting of the human will into the final principle of all action.

Liberalism’s three assaults

By Thomas Storck

Often it can be confusing to try to understand the troubles of the present day. We see a great variety of conflicts, conflicts about politics and economics, about all kinds of social policy, about what are sometimes called the "culture wars." Is there a unifying thread, some framework which ties all of this together? Our media like to portray every controversy as a conflict of liberal versus conservative, but most often the discerning observer sees that this dichotomy makes no sense, and in fact our preoccupation with this alleged fundamental division of ideas often seems designed to confuse Catholics for the sake of someone else’s political agenda rather than to cast light on reality. But nevertheless there is a thread which ties together the cultural history of our time, and even of the generations which preceded us. In this article, then, I wish to advance an explanation not only of the conflicts of our own era, but of the last several hundred years, an explanation grounded in the success of one movement: liberalism. Liberalism here, however, means something much broader than our contemporary American use of that word, and we would do well to put aside its ordinary meaning as we begin to consider the topic. We will be using the word in its European sense, the same sense incidentally in which it is used in papal documents. Liberalism, understood after this manner, is the chief enemy of the Church, and moreover has successfully assaulted Christian civilization on three levels and at three times, and unfortunately its triumph in each case has been nearly complete. Moreover in the course of the three hundred and fifty or so years over which this has taken place the struggle of liberalism with its opponents has produced so many eddies and backwaters and contrary currents that, without this basic framework from which to examine things, these conflicts are likely to seem like a mix of unrelated events and movements.

At the outset, let me roughly define liberalism, a definition which we will clarify as we go along. But a good working definition might be as follows: Liberalism is that general movement in Western civilization which has sought freedom from the restraints im-
posed by Christian teaching, and therefore has attacked Catholic culture, first on the level of Christian economic morality, secondly on the level of the political rights of God, and lastly on the level of the human person itself. And corresponding to these three intellectual assaults have been (first) the overthrow of the guilds and the establishment of individualistic capitalism, (secondly) the overthrow of traditional Catholic regimes, and (thirdly) the assault on humanity via such things as divorce, contraception, abortion, euthanasia and even the attempted overthrow of the natural and complementary division of mankind into two sexes. This liberalism is responsible for the modern world and its pervasive secularism, and is perhaps Satan’s greatest success since the tempting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. To begin, let us look at each of these three assaults in turn.

The economic assault

The economic assault was liberalism’s first attack. Yet it is in the economic sphere that we are most apt to become confused by the different meanings of “liberal.” Milton Friedman, in his book extolling the virtues of free-market capitalism, wrote:

It is extremely convenient to have a label for the political and economic viewpoint elaborated in this book. The rightful and proper label is liberalism. Unfortunately, “As a supreme, if unintended compliment, the enemies of the system of private enterprise have thought it wise to appropriate its label”, so that liberalism has, in the United States, come to have a very different meaning than it did in the nineteenth century or does today over much of the Continent of Europe.

As it developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the intellectual movement that went under the name of liberalism emphasized freedom as the ultimate goal and the individual as the ultimate entity in the society. It supported laissez faire at home as a means of reducing the role of the state in economic affairs and thereby enlarging the role of the individual; it supported free trade abroad as a means of linking the nations of the world together peacefully and democratically.

In other words, liberalism, as I am using it here, and as indeed it is used in most parts of the world, includes many of the doctrines of what Americans call conservatism. But, as Friedman well knows, it is not a conserving force, but rather the opposite, as we will see.

During the Middle Ages Catholic teaching had strongly impressed on society the necessity of keeping in check the powerful human desire for economic gain, just as much as the powerful human desire for sexual pleasure. Richard Tawney writes thus of the medieval attitude:

Material riches are necessary; they have a secondary importance, since without them men cannot support themselves and help one another; the wise ruler, as St. Thomas said, will consider in founding his State the natural resources of the country. But economic motives are suspect. Because they are powerful appetites, men fear them, but they are not mean enough to applaud them. Like other strong passions, what they need, it is thought, is not a clear field, but repression. There is no place in medieval theory for economic activity which is not related to a moral end, and to found a science of society upon the assumption that the appetite for economic gain is a constant and measurable force, to be accepted, like other natural forces, as an inevitable and self-evident datum would have appeared to the medieval thinker as hardly less irrational or less immoral than to make the premise of social philosophy the unrestrained operation of such necessary human attributes as pugnacity or the sexual instinct.

And a little later:

At every turn, therefore, there are limits, restrictions, warnings, against allowing economic interests to interfere with serious affairs. It is right for a man to seek such wealth as is necessary for a livelihood in his station. To seek more is not enterprise, but avarice, and avarice is a deadly sin. Trade is legitimate; the different resources of different countries show that it was intended by Providence. But it is a dangerous business. A man must be sure that he carries it on for the public benefit, and that the profits which he takes are no more than the wages of his labor.

And as another writer put it:

We can, therefore, lay down as the first principle of mediaeval economics that there was a limit to
money-making imposed by the purpose for which the money was made. Each worker had to keep in front of himself the aim of his life and consider the acquiring of money as a means only to an end, which at one and the same justified and limited him. When, therefore, sufficiency had been obtained there could be no reason for continuing further efforts at getting rich, whether as merchant or beggar, except in order to help others. . . .

And men necessarily created institutions and structures to implement these ideas of economic restraint. The most important of these, the craft guild, embodied the quintessential Catholic idea of regulating the economy without direct governmental intervention. Belloc, for instance, summarizes the work of one of the guilds—the fishmongers’—thus: “The . . . Fishmongers’ Guild of London regulated the trade in fish, fixed prices, checked undue competition, prevented the wealthier fishmonger from eating up his smaller brother and so on.” The Middle Ages looked to justice and stability as their economic ideals, and sternly rebuked and even punished those whose excessive desire for gain led them to take advantage of their fellow men.

But, as could be expected, many chafed under these kinds of restraints. And by a variety of means they succeeded in overthrowing the entire medieval system. By both direct and indirect means in both Catholic and Protestant countries, this structure of customs and institutions, whose linchpin was the craft guild, was destroyed between approximately 1600 and 1800. What happened is thus described by Belloc:

What had been for centuries a Christian and therefore satisfactory equilibrium in human relations, gradually developing a free peasantry in the place of the old slave-state, ordering by rule and custom the economic structure of Society, regarding men as connected by status, rather than by contract, guarding against excessive competition, insistent upon stability, disappeared as a result of the mighty shock delivered in the early 16th century. There came in the place of the old stable medieval civilization . . . , and in place of the old social philosophy which for centuries had satisfied mankind, a new state of affairs the various parts of which developed at various rates, but all of which, combined, came in the long run to form the modern world . . . which is] a social state based upon unbridled competition, one eliminating the old idea of status and regarding only contract, and presenting . . . [the] phenomenon of industrial capitalism. . . .

And the result of these changes was summarized by Pope Leo XIII thus:

The ancient workmen’s Guilds were destroyed in the last century, and no other organization took their place. Public institutions and the laws have repudiated the ancient religion. Hence by degrees it has come to pass that Working Men have been given over, isolated and defenseless, to the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition. The evil has been increased by rapacious Usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different form but with the same guilt, still practiced by avaricious and grasping men. And to this must be added the custom of working by contract, and the concentration of so many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals, so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself.

This overthrow of the Church’s economic teaching was the first triumph of liberalism. Though it happened in different locali-
ties and sectors of the economy at different times, it was all but complete by the first third of the nineteenth century. Moreover, this overturning of traditional Catholic economic morality did more than change the economic scene. As the apologist for free-market capitalism, Ludwig von Mises, wrote: "With the spread and progress of capitalism, birth control becomes a universal practice." As we will see below, the hatred of the Church’s economic morality is connected by intimate bonds with hatred of all Christian teaching.

The political assault

Even before liberalism’s first assault was completed, the second assault had begun. It prevailed in England in 1688, and a hundred years later in France in 1789. The political assault is particularly hard for Americans to understand because this expression of liberalism is part of the air we breathe. As Friedrich von Hayek, another avowed liberal and noted free-market economist, has written:

...what in Europe was called “liberalism” was here the common tradition on which the American polity had been built: thus the defender of the American tradition was a liberal in the European sense.

What was the traditional Catholic teaching that liberalism sought to overturn in its political assault? It is clearly stated by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical, *Immortale Dei*, of November 1, 1885.

Man’s natural instinct moves him to live in civil society, for he cannot, if dwelling apart, provide himself with the necessary requirements of life, nor procure the means of developing his mental and moral faculties. Hence it is divinely ordained that he should lead his life—be it family, social or civil—with his fellow-men, amongst whom alone his several wants can be adequately supplied. But as no society can hold together unless some one be over all, directing all to strive earnestly for the common good; every civilized community must have a ruling authority, and this authority, no less than society itself, has its source in nature, and has, consequently, God for its author. Hence it follows that all public power must proceed from God. For God alone is the true and supreme Lord of the world. Everything, without exception, must be subject to Him, and must serve Him, so that whosoever holds the right to govern, holds it from one sole and single source, namely, God, the Sovereign Ruler of all. *There is no power but from God. (Romans 13:1)*

What is Leo saying here? In the first place, in clear opposition to John Locke and other social contract theorists, the Pontiff teaches that society is the natural condition of man, it is not something brought about by some kind of political pact or bargain. Moreover, it is not just for man’s material comfort that society is necessary, but for “developing his mental and moral faculties.” And because society is necessary, because man is social, man is also political, not in the modern sense of having a natural turn for the wheeling and dealing of politicians, but in the classical sense of needing a government, something “directing all to strive earnestly for the common good.” And thus this governing power is both natural and is from God, the Author of nature. Governments are not so much “instituted among men” as simply there, a necessary aspect of human community, and they certainly do not ultimately derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed” but from God.

Many people reading the above passage from Leo XIII would conclude that he was upholding monarchies, or even arguing for the notion of the Divine Right of Kings (a largely Protestant idea incidentally). But Leo was not especially promoting one form of government over another. He even goes on to say: “The right to rule is not necessarily . . . bound up with any special mode of government. It may take this or that form, provided only that it be of a nature to insure the general welfare.” In Catholic Europe there had long been republics, as Iceland or Switzerland or San Marino, and there is no reason
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why the ruler or rulers may not be chosen by popular vote. Leo rather is promoting something much more radical, namely, the idea that governments are from God, that they therefore have duties toward God, that they rule in his name. They are not some human makeshift, some expedient devised when men (reluctantly) came together into society, and moreover their fundamental character has been fixed by God and is not subject to human will.

Although governments must take care that they not swallow up the whole of society or assume that they are the normal and natural party to directly alleviate every human ill, the notion that governments are only a necessary evil is pure liberalism. It ignores the truths that Pope Leo taught, and indeed have been taught consistently by Catholic tradition since the New Testament. Governments are necessary goods and their rule reflects some of the glory of God himself.14

But the various revolutions that shook Europe and the Americas between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries taught that governments were pure creations of the governed and, indeed, ruled in their name and were, in a sense, their servants. Although the doctrine that governments ought to rule *for the benefit of their subjects* is at least as old as Plato and is solidly sanctioned by the Catholic faith, still it was liberalism that destroyed any notion of the ruler or rulers as holding power from God, and therefore (in a sense) to be feared as from God. There is a big difference between a benevolent parent and a hired manager who simply fulfills the will of his employers.

The assault on the human person

The latest assault by liberalism is the assault on the human person. It is the assault we are living with today, the contemporary and latest project of liberalism. But its roots are in the nineteenth century propaganda for divorce, and are pressed by the disordered lives of many of the eighteenth century liberals. But as an organized movement it first championed divorce; divorce was followed by contraception, contraception by abortion, abortion by euthanasia, euthanasia by homosexual conduct, homosexual conduct by the entire abolition of the two created human sexes. But all these assaults are really attacks on the primal truth of the book of Genesis, “Male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). For the creation of man as male and female is a truth about marriage, and thus against divorce; about fertility, and thus against contraception and abortion; about human life, and thus against euthanasia; about the holiness of natural marital sex, and thus against homosexual acts; and especially against the notion that the two created sexes are arbitrary impositions on mankind.

Many people are unaware of the attempt to label the two created human sexes, male and female, as arbitrary and unjust impositions on humanity, but this is exactly what the cutting edge of liberalism is trying to do today. Their first tack was the attempt to separate sex from gender, that is, the biological fact of the two human sexes from their social and cultural expressions, which they term *gender*, and which are seen as *totally socially constructed* and in no way grounded in nature. Then, using such a phenomenon as “sex-change operations,” they begin to deny the very stability and reality of the two created sexes. After that, they claim that whether or not one undergoes such an operation,
one's subjective feeling about what sex/genre one is trumps the physical facts of one's body. And from that is only a short step to the notion that male and female are only two out of a nearly infinite number of possible expressions of human sexuality.

Kate Bornstein is neither a man nor a woman but "hir" own special transgressive creation—and, inevitably, something of a travelling circus. "Ze" was born male, raised as a boy, opted for a sex-change in adulthood, and became a woman. A few years later, she got tired of being a woman, so she stopped—but didn’t want to become a man again. And I think many of us can identify with that. Perhaps this is why "Ze" has become an evangelist for the joys of being transgendered.\(^5\)

Just as the early liberals resented the fact that God decreed justice and restraint in economic relations, and later on liberals resented the fact that the state had God for its author and was accountable to him, so now the latest wave of liberals resents the fact that God has created the human race as male and female. Even if people mutilate their bodies to try to change what God has created, this does not and cannot change the facts. "Male and female he created them." There are two sexes and the social expression of our sexuality, while to some extent dependent on cultural mores, must be rooted in the biological facts if it is to be healthy. Whether liberalism has any more frontiers it hopes to cross only God and Satan know. We know, however, that wherever God has established order liberalism seeks to destroy it and to fulfill its own will, however much this flies in the face of God’s law, human happiness or even common sense and sanity.

The spirit of liberalism

The spirit of liberalism is at bottom opposed to the spirit of Catholicism. Ultimately it is the spirit of Lucifer, of one who opposes all of the order created by God, in heaven.
or on earth, and even (in principle) God himself. It is fundamentally the principle of the supremacy of the will, the principle of I want, of Sic volo, sic jubeo, sic pro ratione stet. Instead of accepting the order established by God and by his representatives on earth, liberalism tears down whatever is opposed to its restless striving to fulfill its desires.

Though the different assaults which liberalism has perpetrated at different times may seem unrelated, and in fact may be manifest in different people, they all result from this same spirit. The fact that certain people hold only parts of the liberal creed (and may even explicitly reject other parts) tends to obscure the links between these different manifestations of liberalism. But in some of its representatives one can find the full liberal spirit. Above I quoted the statement of the free-market economist, Ludwig von Mises, on capitalism and birth control. Mises is refreshingly explicit in making clear his fundamental ideas about human acts and morality.

The ultimate end of action is always the satisfaction of some desires of the acting man. Since nobody is in a position to substitute his own value judgments for those of the acting individual, it is vain to pass judgment on other people's aims and volitions. No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented. The critic either tells us what he believes he would aim at if he were in the place of his fellow; or, in dictatorial arrogance blithely disposing of his fellow's will and aspirations, declares what condition of this other man would better suit himself, the critic.  

Here is liberalism unabashed: the refusal to make "value judgments" on human behavior; the exalting of the human will into the final principle of action. The connection between such a fundamental attitude toward human moral acts and free-market individualism is not widely recognized in this country, but it is nonetheless true, for both indicate the same attitude toward the Divine order. That is, both have the same inner form, though both differ outwardly considerably. Both are expressions of the essentially unruly human will.

A return to divine order

If there is to be a return to God's order for created beings, then this return will have to be accomplished on all levels. It is not enough to simply defeat the latest assault of liberalism, unless we likewise attempt to overcome the two earlier assaults, because they are all rooted in the same thing. One can see this in advertising, for example, which was illegal in Catholic nations during the Middle Ages and even into the eighteenth century. Advertising has been one of the chief means by which sexual images and enticements have made their way very publicly into our culture, on the sides of busses, into our homes via the electronic media, etc. It is natural that the free market exploits the sexual urge to sell its products, for both misuse of the economic process and of sex are aspects of the same liberalism. So in accomplishing its goal of luring consumers to buy goods they may well not need, advertising also very often works against chastity, thus nicely combining the first and third assault of liberalism into one.

At the present moment it does not appear likely that the culture of the West will experience a conversion, at least any time soon. But we can always seek to convert our own hearts and minds. As Catholics we have to understand what liberalism is and fortify ourselves internally against its varying manifestations. Otherwise we will be foolish dupes of one or more kinds of liberalism. For the Devil is very clever. One of his cleverest ploys has been to make liberalism seem as if it were really two or three separate and unrelated movements, in order to divide its opposition. So some who are very much opposed to liberalism's assault on the human person nevertheless are defenders of liberalism's first assault, and vice versa. Satan wants to keep mankind distracted with as many side
issues as he can to prevent us from seeing the main question. But the magisterium of the Church has never been distracted, and in the writings of the several Supreme Pontiffs one can find consistent denunciations of all the assaults of liberalism. Thus it behooves us, as usual, to study and learn from the authentic teaching of Christ’s vicars. Only then will we have hope of understanding the signs of the times and fighting the good fight against our real enemies.

* A cassette recording of the above article may be obtained from: Keep the Faith, Inc., 50 South Franklin Turnpike, Suite 1, Ramsey, N.J. 07446. Price: $5.00 postpaid (Canada: add 50¢).

1 Some may wonder why I do not include the Protestant revolt as the first manifestation of liberalism. Though Protestantism, along with the philosophical error of nominalism, is certainly one of the ultimate factors which gave birth to liberalism, it did not usually at first have as its aim the overthrowing of traditional morality. In some ways, such as the seventeenth century Protestant doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, it even seemed to oppose the new trends.


6 Ibid., pp. 100-101.


8 Human Action: A Treatise on Economics (New Haven: Yale University, 1949) p. 665. Mises also says, “Those fighting birth control want to eliminate a device indispensable for the preservation of peaceful human cooperation and the social division of labor... The philosophers and theologians who assert that birth control is contrary to the laws of God and Nature refuse to see things as they really are” (ibid., p. 668).

9 In one of the latest papal documents, the Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in America, John Paul describes neoliberalism as a “system... based on a purely economic conception of man, this system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples” (no. 56).

10 The French Revolution not only abolished the monarchy and murdered the King and Queen, but also abolished the guilds, and prohibited workers from forming unions or going on strike. The revolutionaries also intensified the enclosure movement, that is, the taking of land from the rural poor for grazing purposes, and established internal free trade. This is another clear indication of the interconnection of the varying forms of liberalism, Alfred Cobban, A History of Modern France, vol. I, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 2d ed. 1961) pp. 171-72.


Condé B. Pallen, in his translation and adaptation of Félix Sarda y Salvany’s work, Liberalism Is a Sin (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books, 1993), using a somewhat different, though related, definition of liberalism, nonetheless says: “In America [liberalism] would scarcely seem to exist at all, so ingrained is it in our social conditions, so natural is it to the prevailing modes of thought, so congenial is it with the dominant religious notions about us... Indeed it is the very constituent of the pseudo-religious and pseudo-moral atmosphere we daily breathe” (p. 156).


13 See, for example, Romans 13:1-7 or I Peter 2:13-17.

14 “Hallowed therefore in the minds of Christians is the very idea of public authority, in which they recognize some likeness and symbol as it were of the divine Majesty, even when it is exer-

15 The Independent (London), March 8, 1998. Consider also the following from the article, “Patriarchy is Such a Drag: the Strategic Possibilities of a Postmodern Account of Gender,” Harvard Law Review, vol. 108, no. 8, June 1995: “Whereas family and marriage are merely legally conferred statuses, conception, pregnancy, and childbirth, as biological processes, seem to be archetypes of naturalness. But procreation is much more like marriage and family than this focus on biology suggests; each is an experience as well as an institution” (p. 1982); and “Biological sex is revealed to have no inevitable meaning, but only the social meaning attached to it on the basis of gender identity” (p. 1993).

Also this from Leslie Feinberg’s book, Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue: “Transgender is the term that has come to refer to all those who blur or bridge the boundary of gender expression they were assigned at birth: cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersex people, Two Spirits, masculine females, feminine males, drag kings, and drag queens.” Quoted in a review in Library Journal (October 1, 1998), p. 121.

16 Human Action: A Treatise on Economics, pp. 18-19.

17 Mises’ disdainful statements about religion further illustrate the liberal mind in action. After explaining that (in his view), advertising can entice a consumer to try a product only once and that if the product is not good, the consumer will not buy it again, he goes on to say, “Entirely different are conditions in those fields in which experience cannot teach us anything. The statements of religious, metaphysical and political propaganda can be neither verified nor falsified by experience. With regard to the life beyond and the absolute, any experience is denied to men living in this world.” Human Action: a Treatise on Economics, p. 318. Though it is true that experience conceived after an empiricist manner can rarely tell us about religious truths (except for miracles), still I think his contemptuous tone is obvious here.

Earlier Mises, after a reference to “the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations” says the following: “The pompous statements which people make about things unknowable and beyond the power of the human mind, their cosmologies, world views, religions, mysticisms, metaphysics, and conceptual fantasies differ widely from one another” ibid., pp. 180-81.


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