

The Political Temptation

By Thomas Storck

For anyone worried about the crackpot foreign policy of the Bush administration, the recent victory by the Democrats in the mid-term elections was a happy event. But not too happy - and that for at least two reasons, as I will explain below. Although it is far from clear that they will take any effective action, if the Democrats can restrain the Bush administration in its war making, can prevent a war with Iran, even perhaps help bring about an end to the war in Iraq, then I think their victory will be justified. But I know we can count on no such thing. And in the meantime, the Democrats are officially committed to an agenda on what are called "life issues" that no Catholic can approve of. But as I argued elsewhere, the possibility of an attack on Iran, especially the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons in such an attack, does in my opinion create the conditions referred to by Cardinal Ratzinger in his 2004 memorandum, "Worthiness to Receive Holy Communion." In that memorandum he stated,

"When a Catholic does not share a candidate's stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons".

Those who have objected to my stand on this point do not seem to me to have distinguished between the prohibition on a Catholic legislator ever voting to approve measures such as abortion or euthanasia, or a voter in a referendum doing so, and a voter in an ordinary election who must choose among many imperfect candidates in complicated political situations.

While the support given by the Democratic party to abortion and a host of related evils since the 1970s is obviously one reason we should not celebrate their election victory overmuch, it is in fact the more superficial of the reasons that I alluded to above. For while we can always hope for a change of heart on the part of the Democrats - even if driven by nothing but self-interest - a more fundamental reason why a Democratic victory is in the long run of lesser importance lies in the nature of politics. In order to understand this, we must digress to look at what exactly we mean by politics.

The Polis

Man obviously is a social animal. That is, God created us to live in community. But a community naturally entails more than just a mass of men living side by side. It entails some sort of community structure, in fact, some authority, some government. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, seconded and ratified by Pope Leo XIII in such encyclicals as *Immortale Dei* and *Libertas*, were clear on the fact that not only a community, but a *political* community is natural to mankind. Man is a political animal, not in the sense that the nitty-gritty of political activity, all the logrolling and deal-making that politicians engage in, is our true sphere of activity, but rather in the sense that we must live in some kind of polis or political community. A democracy, a monarchy, even a tribe all have authority structures. Some are more wisely designed than others, but all witness to the fact that a polis is man's natural home. As St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out, even if man had never fallen, we would still need some political structure, some kind of communal authority.

Politics, Culture, Reciprocal Influence

If this is so, then I certainly do not despise politics. But what is politics? Primarily politics is man's deliberation about the fundamental good for the polis, about the wisest means of living in community and creating conditions for the perfection of human nature. The evils that we associate with politics, whether in legislatures or the courts of kings, such as deals, bribes, corruption and so on, are a result of the Fall of Adam rather than his creation. But political decisions about the good for a society are of the greatest importance and have great effect on the health of a culture. The legalization of abortion, for example, by the U.S. Supreme Court has done immense moral and cultural damage to the United States. Approval of same-sex unions does likewise. But the interaction between law and culture is complicated. While law does influence and can deform a culture, a country's religious and cultural character also go a long way in shaping the kind of laws it has. Plato noted that the arts possess a power to nullify even good laws. Certainly the bad use of the arts will corrupt a culture and eventually destroy a regime of good and wise laws. Both law and culture influence each other, and each is capable to corrupting the other or helping to ennoble it. If a nation is ever to undergo a real reformation, if her religious, moral and cultural character is to change for the better, then more than simply its laws must change. At the same time as better laws are enacted there must be a moral renovation on the deepest level. Otherwise the new laws will either be abolished or ignored.

This mistake of ignoring the reciprocal influence and relative importance of the political and the cultural is, it seems to me, the mistake of those Catholics who have placed their hopes in the Republican party. Although on some matters, such as abortion or euthanasia, the Republicans profess an agenda pretty much in harmony with Catholic teaching, at the same time much of what they stand for militates against the welfare of families and ordinary Americans and even against the hope of ever making abortion illegal. For what is the promotion of unrestrained capitalism and consumerism, except the fuel for abortion? For if life is all about feeding my own ego, why should I be troubled by a baby that I do not want, or a marriage I am tired of? But even if the Republicans were as serious about stopping abortion as they are about their neo-liberal economic agenda, what would they be able to do? A culture of hedonism, such as we have, requires abortion as a backstop for contraceptive failure, and a means for facilitating casual sex. Anyone who thinks that the hedonism of our culture can be separated from its materialism, its practical atheism, its excessive individualism, deceives himself. All these cultural ills are connected.

Culture Wars?

This is why the so-called "culture wars," while concerned with important issues, were at best only a partial answer. At worst, they were a smokescreen to hide the economic exploitation of America while keeping the populace divided by issues that were of little interest to the economic elites. *They* would always have access to relatively safe abortions, even if no one else did, just as they had access to all the alcohol they wanted during prohibition. And although a law prohibiting abortion would be a great good, by itself it will not stop the killing of our unborn without a corresponding moral change of heart. I do not mean to underestimate the effects of good legislation in changing both the behavior and the moral outlook of citizens. I only want to point out that in the long run good laws need to exist within a culture that looks toward God and the common good if they are to last and to be effective.

The Constitution v. Good and Evil

An additional difficulty in the United States is the constitutional prohibition of the "establishment of religion," a prohibition which is understood as meaning an essential neutrality on the part of the government about many questions of morals and all questions of faith. This is far from the role of government as envisioned not just by St. Thomas or Leo XIII, but by the pagans Plato or Aristotle, all of whom saw the ultimate justification of the state in the promotion of virtue. But since we do not much believe that the political process can insist on only one notion of what is virtue, and since our own polity contains citizens with the most diverse views on that subject, our political actions can produce only very limited results. They will rarely reach to the substantial issues of good and evil, which ultimately are of either Christ or Satan. Everyone is considered to be entitled to his own opinion, and the Church of Satan enjoys the same legal status as the Church of God.

Although this situation of legal relativism has been much exacerbated in recent decades, it was always present in potency.

USA, Truth and Evangelization

Never formally Christian, the United States did not possess a political tradition that allowed it, as a community, to come to grips with questions of truth or falsehood. Truth was always personal and private. And if truth was private, so also was religion and so also was God. The true God had no authority greater than anyone else's conception of the deity. All religious opinions were ipso facto reduced to mere expressions of personal opinion.

So in the face of all this, what is a Catholic to do?

The real Catholic task today, I think, is not mainly a political one. It is the slow and uncertain task of evangelization, education, works of charity --- the showing forth of Jesus Christ and his Church for the work of conversion, the conversion of both those inside and those outside the Church. The conversion of Catholics back to the genuine teachings of the Faith, back to a stricter and more fervent living of that Faith, and the conversion of our non-Catholic fellow countrymen to the Faith of Christ's one Church. Moreover, the conversion of heart and mind that is required goes much deeper than most of us imagine. For we need to reform our entire manner of thinking and living, to inform ourselves with the richness and wisdom of the entire Catholic tradition. The current bitter political divide among Catholics demonstrates, it seems to me, that most of us have chosen an essentially secular political orientation. Too many of us are simply the Catholic wings of the conservative or liberal movements. But to act in such a way is not to be really Catholic. It is not to present Jesus Christ and the riches of the Faith for the salvation of our contemporaries.

So even if the election does restrain, however little, any evil, it is at most a small step in the right direction. Right now the chief steps we can take in the right direction will come not from political action but from learning and preaching Jesus Christ, from studying and telling others about his Church and the Faith that it teaches and in giving witness to this in our own lives. This is our duty, this is the charge which we as Christians have, a duty and charge that is ours today and always.