

# books in REVIEW

THOMAS STORCK

## TO MAKE CATHOLICS FIT INTO AMERICA

**We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition.** By John Courtney Murray. Rowman & Littlefield. 300 pages. \$24.95.

John Courtney Murray's *We Hold These Truths* is one of the most oft-mentioned American Catholic books of the past fifty years. It appeared in 1960, just after John F. Kennedy's election as President, and Murray himself was pictured on the cover of the December 12, 1960, *Time* magazine. *We Hold These Truths* is an important book in that it deals with important questions, even if it most often comes up with the wrong answers. But the questions Murray raises are still, though not always explicitly, central to the intellectual and even political debates carried on

among Catholics in the U.S. For that reason alone, Murray's book is worth reading and discussing today. Because he wrote before the post-conciliar debacle and before Catholics so fiercely identified with what are essentially political labels — liberal, conservative, and now neoconservative — Murray can help us to understand better the origins and context of current controversies.

John Courtney Murray, a Jesuit and Professor of Theology at Woodstock College in Maryland, spent much of the 1950s writing articles whose aim was to overturn the then-reigning Catholic doctrine that, all things being equal, the best situation for Catholics was to live in a Catholic state with an explicitly Catholic government — a government that was distinct from the Church to be sure, but not separate in the sense that the two powers pursued their own aims without reference to each other. Because of this, Murray got into some trouble with his Jesuit superiors and was prohibited from attending the first session of the Second Vatican Council. But

he did eventually attend, and, according to the generally accepted account, Murray's views were then embodied in the Council's decree of religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. But this is not the place to discuss that document. Suffice it to say that *Dignitatis Humanae* need not be understood as reflective of Murray's position, and can be read as consistent with the traditional teaching of the Church.

Although Pope Leo XIII had reminded American bishops in 1895 that "it would be very erroneous to draw the conclusion that in America is to be sought the type of the most desirable status of the Church" and that the Church here "would bring forth more abundant fruits if, in addition to liberty, she enjoyed the favor of the laws and the patronage of the public authority," this teaching was never very popular, or even very much known, among American Catholics. Laboring under an inferiority complex and desiring above all to fit in, Catholics in general enthusiastically embraced the messianic nationalism that most often passes

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for patriotism in the U.S. Murray's dissatisfaction with Pope Leo's teaching seems to have stemmed from that same root, namely, his desire to be a good American above all. And so *We Hold These Truths* is in the main a book about Catholics fundamentally embracing what he calls the "American proposition." Yes, Murray is nuanced; yes, he writes with more of a sense of theological tradition and of the shortcomings of American Protestantism than the Catholic neoconservatives of today. But at bottom his aim is to explain and justify America as a Catholic project, or at least one that can be made Catholic.

*We Hold These Truths* is a collection of essays that appeared during the 1950s in various journals of opinion, Catholic and secular. Like most such compilations, it addresses a variety of themes. He deals with the questions of public support for parochial schools, the ethics of nuclear warfare, and our policy toward Communism, both at home and abroad. But a fundamental

theme runs through the book, especially the first five chapters and the concluding two: How Catholic thought, and especially the Natural Law tradition, can justify and enrich the "American proposition."

We may question what Murray seems to take for granted—the assertion that America is a proposition. In the very first sentence of his own Preface, Murray states that it "is classic American doctrine...that the new nation which our Fathers brought forth on this continent was dedicated to a 'proposition.'" But why this should be so, Murray never says. Why a nation should be more an idea than a place, and why America, more than Spain or Argentina or Australia, should be dedicated to an idea are questions most Americans have never asked. Nor does Murray ask them. He simply accepts that we are as much a proposition as a nation and goes on from there.

Having accepted this claim, Murray proceeds to consider both how this claim may be defended and

the place that Catholics have in this unusual polity. In brief, he is not satisfied with many of the justifications that have been given, both at the time of his writing and before. His attitude toward both the Founding Fathers and their philosophical mentor, John Locke, is ambiguous, as we will see; but at least he argues that their thought needs completion and amplification from Catholic Natural Law doctrine.

Murray affirms that the authors of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights incorporated important principles of traditional Christian thinking into their work: "the men who framed the American Bill of Rights understood history and tradition.... They too were individualists, but not to the point of ignoring the social nature of man. They did their thinking within the tradition of freedom that was their heritage from England." The monarchies of the baroque era, with their distorted notion of the divine right of kings, had divorced political power from any connection with popular consent. But with the founding of America, Murray avers, the earlier tradition was regained. While it is correct that medieval theorists had insisted on important checks on royal power, Murray here ignores many important questions as he represents the American founding as simply a continuation of the Catholic European political tradition. For example, while in later chapters he implies that the explicit intellectual influences on the Founders were Protestantism and John Locke, both of which he severely criticizes, at times he argues that despite these prevalent theories, the Founders stood more in the central Western political tradi-

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tion than they realized and thus (quoting John C. Calhoun) the “federal constitution... is superior to the wisdom of any or all the men by whose agency it was made.”

This ambivalence reappears in his treatment of John Locke, arguably the most important intellectual influence at the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. At one point he calls Locke’s ideas “superficial” and speaks of “his thin rationalism, and his empty nominalism.” He characterizes Locke as essentially an ideologue, not a philosopher. But then he speaks of his “British common sense, caution and feeling for tradition.” Murray cannot deny the fact the Locke, and many of the American Founders, held ideas that were either at variance with, or at best were watered-down versions of, traditional Christian political principles. But in order to save the “American proposition,” Murray insists that despite this, they managed to preserve these older principles and incorporate them into their project. This is one of the fundamental questions on which necessarily hangs one’s attitude toward the American political tradition.

Earlier I noted that before the Second Vatican Council the received teaching among Catholics was that, all things being equal, an explicit Catholic political state was the ideal. But Murray proclaims that the Catholic Church’s strictures on separation of Church and state, made over and over again in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, applied only to European laicist liberalism, that is, to the type of regime that became common in countries of Latin culture during the 19th century and which severely restricted Catholic activity

while at the same time trumpeting its devotion to liberty. And although it is true that the American arrangement was both milder and provided more freedom for Catholic activity, it did not meet the approval of a succession of popes, from Pius IX through Pius XII, most notably (as we have seen) Leo XIII.

How does Murray deal with this? Either he ignores it or he distorts the evidence. For example, he claims more than once that Pope Leo XIII, who quite explicitly had upheld the right and duty of a government to protect the Catholic religion and prohibit or restrict error, was interested only in freedom for the Church — i.e., that Leo wanted not special protection for the Church, but only a legal freedom to pursue her mission. This is so far from the truth as to be absurd.

Murray discusses an important address, *Ciriesce*, that Pius XII had given in 1953. While Pius did say here that sometimes toleration of evil and error on the part of state authorities is both allowable and even necessary, he takes for granted that this is due to certain specific circumstances, and that in general there is a “duty of repressing moral and religious error.” Toleration as such is not an ideal, but may be mandated due to “higher and more general norms.” Pius even speaks of the “dangerous consequences that stem from toleration,” and therefore of a Catholic statesman’s duty to carefully weigh all factors before deciding in favor of toleration of religious error. But what does Murray say? He says that the American “First Amendment is simply the legal enunciation of this papal statement.” Murray appears to be counting on his readers’ ignorance of Catholic tradition and is perhaps hoping to mis-

lead the largely non-Catholic American public as to the Church’s real stance on these questions.

This discussion of the Church and the American political tradition leads to Murray’s principal error: America is bigger than the Catholic Church. We must unite in a political community whose boundaries are set not by Catholic doctrine but by American tradition. The First Amendment is an “article of peace,” prescribing agreement about how we are to act without agreement about ultimate truths. But how can we have anything except accidental agreement unless we agree about ultimates? And where does this lead in the end? Murray writes: “in a pluralist society no minority group has the right to demand that government should impose a general censorship, affecting all the citizenry... according to the special standards held within one group.” Although Murray wrote this with regard to censorship, who cannot see here almost the same words that are used with reference to the legal prohibition of abortion or same-sex unions? The Catholic Church, the Universal Church, is now simply a “minority group,” and her teachings, guaranteed by the protection of Almighty God, are now

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only “special standards held within one group.” Moreover, Murray’s constant appeal to Natural Law means little if the voice of the Catholic Church, the guarantor of both natural and revealed truth, is excluded from a final determination of what is and is not moral. While it is certainly the case that we are in no practical position to insist that Catholic morality — which is mostly Natural Law — reign supreme over American political and cultural life, that does not mean that we should simply acquiesce in our status as a “minority group” or admit in principle that American pluralism is either good or inevitable.

Murray’s project, then, is to make Catholics fit into America. He is correct that, with Natural Law, Catholics can provide the best intellectual framework for the “American proposition,” but he errs when he subordinates the Church to what he sees as a larger project. We become, in the end, simply another “minority group.” Murray has reversed Chesterton’s dictum that the Church is larger than the world, and has



made America the framework within which the Church must act and even understand herself.

As I have suggested, we can see in this book the adumbrations of some of today’s political controversies. For example, Murray calls Thomas Aquinas “the first Whig,” a label often repeated today by Catholic neocons and libertarians. Such writers claim that the founding of America was not primarily the triumph of Enlightenment thought, but rather essentially rooted in medieval Christian tradition. This debate has far-reaching consequences over such diverse matters as economic and foreign policy, and the fundamental view we should take of our Constitution and political establishment. Murray is nearly as wrong on these matters as are the neocons, but it is helpful to see the controversy as it existed some 45 years ago, when things were less polemical than today.

There are, though, some good things I can say about this book. Murray’s criticism of the essential injustice of the lack of public financial support for the Catholic school system makes for interesting reading, though his trust in the ultimate willingness of his compatriots to recognize this injustice seems widely misplaced. And, more fundamentally, writing before ecumenism seemingly made Catholics forget the unique truth of our Faith, Murray is refreshingly and amusingly frank about Protestantism. “If it be meant that [Natural Law] is alien to the general Protestant moral system, *in so far as there is such a thing*, the charge is true enough” (emphasis added). The essentially Protestant tenor of the American mind is something that has not changed since Murray wrote and is not likely to

change soon.

This edition also includes what is called a “Critical Introduction” by Peter Lawler. It is, however, not critical. Lawler neither criticizes Murray’s thought nor thoughtfully engages it; rather, he heaps mostly uncritical praise on it, and does not aid the reader in understanding how to approach Murray’s arguments with a view to examining their truth claims. ■

## BRIEFLY REVIEWED

**Charles de Foucauld: In the Footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth.** By Annie of Jesus. *New City Press.* 103 pages. \$12.95.

Even in times of sadness, conflict, and war, God blesses us with men and women filled with the Holy Spirit. Charles de Foucauld was such a man, a priest who sought the Way of Jesus. Charles was born on September 15, 1858. A child of tragedy, he lost both his parents by the time he was 12. Devastated by their deaths, he early on lost his way and fell into sin. Still, there was something positive in his abiding sense of adventure. Learning that the French army was moving into Africa, he applied to a regiment in Algeria. The vast spaces of Algeria fascinated him, and so there he remained, living among the Moroccans — and learning a great lesson.

Charles realized that there was something beautiful in Islamic devotion. As Annie of Jesus notes, “It was