

# THE ACTON INSTITUTE — A GENUINE EXPRESSION OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT?

THOMAS STORCK

Lord Acton (John Emerich Edward Dalbert-Acton, 1834–1902) is chiefly remembered today for his remark that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but it would be well were more generally known about him, for as a leader of liberal Catholicism in the nineteenth century he is a fitting symbol in the conflict between different versions of the Faith which has afflicted the Church since the 1960s. It is interesting, therefore, that Acton has been chosen as the patron of an institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan, an institute that is often considered as part of the orthodox Catholic “movement” in the United States. But as we will see, the institute’s name and patron are well chosen, for it continues the tradition of liberal and even dissenting Catholicism that Lord Acton himself participated in and that many of the Acton Institute’s supporters would doubtless blush to be identified with, if they knew exactly who Acton was and what he stood for.

The true face of the Acton Institute is clear from statements made, or formerly made, on their web site ([www.acton.org](http://www.acton.org)), for example, their kind words about Ignaz von Döllinger (theological tutor of Lord Acton), who left the Church rather than accept the First Vatican Council’s definition of papal infallibility, and their opposition to censorship of pornography on the Internet, but in this article I will concentrate on their dissent from the social Magisterium of the Catholic Church. I will examine assertions made by the Institute’s president, Fr. Robert Sirico, to see whether they can be squared with the explicit teaching of the Church.

First, however, we must look at the the underlying difficulty, the root, in fact, of the Acton Institute’s dissent from the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. This lies in their unabashed acceptance of *liberalism*. In discussing liberalism it is imperative to recognize that this term, as used in papal teaching, does not mean the same thing as it does in contemporary political discourse in the United States. We would do well to spend time discussing exactly what *liberal* means in order to understand the fundamental disagreement between the Acton Institute and Catholic doctrine.

Liberalism, as that term is used in papal teaching, and indeed in Europe and throughout most of the world, is that movement in Western civilization which arose in opposition to the Christian political and economic order of the Middle Ages, and to the continuation of that order by all

or most European governments, even after the Middle Ages ended. Thus these governments believed that they had duties toward God, including that of caring for the poor and seeing that the economy fulfilled its function of supplying all citizens with the material things needed for this life. Certainly these governments fulfilled their duties imperfectly, but none of them would have denied that it had such a duty.

Liberalism, however, in effect denies that the State or the human community is a creation of God or has duties toward him. At most, liberalism accepts that the individual has duties toward God. Important liberal theorists such as John Locke, held that society and the state originated in an agreement among men, the so-called social contract, and thus was a purely human creation, and as such, can have no inherent duties toward God. Liberal economic writers, such as Adam Smith, attacked the notion that the State should regulate the economy in the interests of the common good, positing instead that the economy was a self-regulating mechanism, the less interfered with by the state the better.

The Catholic Church confronted liberalism in the eighteenth, and especially the nineteenth, centuries. And this liberal doctrine Pius IX, and even more clearly his successor, Leo XIII, taught that the State itself was a creation of God and thus had duties to God.

For men living together in society are under the power of God no less than individuals are, and society, not less than individuals, owes gratitude to God, who gave it being and maintains it, and whose ever-bounteous goodness enriches it with countless blessings (Leo XIII, Encyclical *Immortale Dei*, November 1, 1885).

Liberals were not only hostile to the concept of the state as created by God and subject to his laws, but they opposed any efforts of the government to intervene in the supposedly self-regulating market. They loudly cried that such economic restraints retarded the progress of humanity. Now economic activity no longer was to need regulation, for the “invisible hand” of Adam Smith was to guarantee that greed and self-interest would work out the best for everyone.

What was the result of this new approach to economics and government? Pope Leo’s classic description is worth repeating:

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

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MR. STORCK, a librarian in Washington, D.C., has written *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order* (1998) and *The Catholic Milieu* (1987).

ancient religion. Hence by degrees it has 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 a 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 rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself (Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 2; May 15, 1891).

Thus liberalism, as used in papal documents, and as it affects the economic order, means something like what Paul II has called "rigid capitalism" or "unbridled capitalism," a more or less free-market approach to the economy. It obviously includes important elements of what we in the United States call *conservatism*. Now let us turn to the Acton Institute's own statements and see how they characterize the relations of liberalism and Catholicism.

In a column in the September/October 1997 issue of *Religion & Liberty*, Fr. Sirico writes of John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, and asserts that in that document "two traditions have come together ... religious orthodoxy and liberal social theory..." Whether Fr. Sirico's claim that *Centesimus* does indeed accept the liberal tradition is true or not, we will examine later, but it is interesting that Fr. Sirico is not bold enough to claim that the Church has *always* accepted the free market, for in the same article he writes that

the Church, during certain periods, has strongly criticized what was construed to be the free society, partly because some social thinkers conflated the theories of economic liberalism with moral libertinism, viewing them as one and the same and as mutually reinforcing.

But now, he claims, because "of the courage John Paul II and his case in favor of the free society ... No longer do we feel compelled to speak of classical liberalism and religious orthodoxy as belonging to two separate intellectual worlds."

Thus we have Fr. Sirico's frank admission that he stands in the tradition of liberal thought, so that if we find the Church has always condemned that tradition, then logically Fr. Sirico's entire enterprise will fall. For the popes objected to the tradition of liberalism not merely because they saw it as promoting "moral libertinism," but because their conception of the task of government is entirely at odds with Fr. Sirico's. The government as such is a creation of God, and as such has duties toward God and toward its subjects. It is not a mere enforcer of contracts, but must have an active care for the common good.

In the same article Fr. Sirico has some interesting words

about Lord Acton. Speaking of the conflict between the Catholic and liberal traditions, Sirico says,

As the tensions mounted in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the allegiances of men such as Lord Acton were torn as they came to believe that they had to choose between spiritual authority and the dictates of reason, a situation the late scholastics would have seen as a grave departure from teaching of their master, Saint Thomas.

It is not just the late scholastics who would have viewed such a man with alarm, but St. Thomas himself. But the Angelic Doctor's reply would have been that the poor man in question had not reasoned well if he found himself opposed to the teachings of the Church. The necessary agreement between the Catholic faith and human reason does not mean the necessary agreement between the Catholic faith and Lord Acton's reasoning. Since our reasoning can err, but the Church cannot, it is clear which of the two must yield. This is not to denigrate reason, but to point out that no individual's reasoning power is infallible.

Before proceeding further we will look at statements of various popes to see if there has been a consistent tradition of papal condemnation of liberalism, including the liberal tradition in both government and economics. In these selections, which I take from various papal documents, I will show how liberalism, either by name or not, has been explicitly defined as an enemy of Catholic faith and Christian civilization. First two selections from Pope Pius XI:

With regard to the civil power, Leo XIII boldly passed beyond the restrictions imposed by liberalism, and fearlessly proclaimed the doctrine that the civil power is more than the mere guardian of law and order, and that it must strive with all zeal "to make sure that the laws and institutions, the general character and administration of the commonwealth, should be such as of themselves to realize public well-being and private prosperity" (Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 25, May 1931).

In fact, the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* completely overthrew those tottering tenets of liberalism which had long hampered effective intervention by the government. It prevailed upon the peoples themselves to develop their social policy more intensely and on truer lines, and also encouraged outstanding Catholics to give such efficacious help and assistance to rulers of the State that in legislative assemblies they were not infrequently the foremost advocates of the new policy (*Ibid.*, no. 27).

Next a passage from Pope Pius XII:

And, while the State in the nineteenth century, through excessive exaltation of liberty, considered as its exclusive scope the safe-guarding of liberty by the law, Leo XIII admonished it that it had also the duty to interest itself in social welfare, taking care of the

entire people and of all its members, especially the weak and the dispossessed, through a generous social program and the creation of a labor code (Address to Italian workers on the Feast of Pentecost, June 1, 1941).

Then a quotation from Pope Paul VI:

On another side, we are witnessing a renewal of the liberal ideology. This current asserts itself both in the name of economic efficiency, and for the defence of the individual against the increasingly overwhelming hold of organizations and as a reaction against the totalitarian tendencies of political powers. Certainly, personal initiative must be maintained and developed. But do not Christians who take this path tend to idealize liberalism in their turn, making it a proclamation in favor of freedom? They would like a new model, more adapted to present-day conditions, while easily forgetting that at the very root of philosophical liberalism is an erroneous affirmation of the autonomy of the individual in his activity, his motivation and the exercise of his liberty. Hence, the liberal ideology likewise calls for careful discernment on their part (*Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 35, May 14, 1971).

These statements alone ought to convince any Catholic who cares to think with the Church, that the Church has always opposed liberalism and its restricted notion of the role of government. But now I will take certain specific statements made by the Acton Institute, statements which reveal its application of liberalism to the economy, and contrast them with the teaching of the Church, including that of *Centesimus Annus*.

First let us look at a quote from Lord Acton, printed on the cover of a leaflet distributed by the Institute. "Liberty is the highest political end of man. . .!" This assertion is hardly congruent with the teaching of the Catholic tradition. St. Thomas, for example, says that the end of society is "to live according to virtue" (*De Regimine Principum*, I, 14). And this truth, that both individual man and man in society are both ordered, not toward freedom, but toward *virtue* as the ultimate end, is the truth upon which the entire liberal tradition founders. Liberty the highest political end of man? Not justice, not virtue, not the common good? All else flows from this fundamental error, the error, in fact, of Lucifer, who desired liberty above all else. The society that values liberty as its highest political goal, that refuses to safeguard the common good (except by pious exhortations), that allows for complete freedom of contract — this will be the domain of the Devil and his apologists.

The next statement of Fr. Sirico's that we will look at is this: "So long as individuals avoid forceful or fraudulent actions in their dealings with one another, government is to stay out of the their business" (*Acton Notes*, January 1998). Anyone at all acquainted with the tradition of Catholic social thought knows that this can hardly be

squared with the teaching of the Magisterium. To take but a few examples, we have Leo XIII's teaching in *Rerum Novarum*,

The richer population have many ways of protecting themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; those who are badly off have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly rely upon the the assistance of the State. And it is for this reason that wage-earners, who are, undoubtedly, among the weak and needy should be specially cared for and protected by the commonwealth (no. 29).

And, in a statement that utterly contradicts what Fr. Sirico says, Leo rejects the theory that free agreement between employer and employee should be the rule in economic affairs when he notes, in connection with the question of a just wage, that "there is a dictate of nature more imperious and more ancient than any bargain between man and man, that the remuneration must be enough to support the wage-earner in reasonable and frugal comfort" (*Rerum Novarum*, 34). It is simply false to say that, absent force or fraud, the government should stay out of people's business.

We have already seen how in *Quadragesimo Anno* Pius XI says that, Leo XIII "boldly passed beyond the restrictions imposed by liberalism, and fearlessly proclaimed the doctrine that the civil power is more than the mere guardian of law and order . . ." In other words, Pius XI explicitly denies the conception of government which Fr. Sirico champions, and like Leo, sees a strong, though not unlimited, role for the State. It is true that the popes have been careful not to call for a statist solution to socio-economic problems, but it should be clear that they definitely see an activist role for government, but within limits. However, these limits are not the limits that Fr. Sirico would like to impose on the State.

John Paul II in *Centesimus* makes clear that State has a wider role than merely enforcing laws against force or fraud, but that it must be concerned with the

preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the State had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the State and all of society have the duty of *defending those collective goods* which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual (no. 40).

And immediately he states: "Here we find a new limit on the market: there are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic."

Other statements that John Paul makes in the same encyclical are equally damning to Fr. Sirico's position. First here is a statement from *Centesimus*, one of the hand-

ful that Fr. Sirico and those of like mind often quote: "It would appear that, on the level of individual nations and of international relations, *the free market* is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs" (no. 34).

But the Pontiff immediately goes on to say,

But this is true only for those needs which are "solvent," insofar as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources which are "marketable," insofar as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price. But there are many human needs which find no place on the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. . . . Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists *something which is due to the person because he is a person*, by reason of his lofty dignity.

A similar caution on the market may be found in the following statement of John Paul, speaking of the kind of society that we should desire and work toward:

Such a society is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied (no. 35).

These statements are enough for anyone to see that Fr. Sirico and Catholic teaching are not in agreement, for Fr. Sirico would never admit that the market needed to be "controlled," least of all by the State.

The apparent plausibility of Fr. Sirico's position comes from the fact that he contrasts the free market only with the evils of statism, socialism and communism. Most people think that either capitalism or some form of socialism are the only "live options" in economics. They are hardly aware that the economic arrangements advocated by the popes are neither those of socialism nor of free-market capitalism, and if someone were to tell them about distributism or solidarism, they would likely reply that since they do not presently exist, or perhaps never existed, they need not be taken seriously. This makes as much sense as to say that since there never has been a society in which chastity was entirely observed, we should not bother to promote chastity in our own society. Nor can we ignore the statement of Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus* that "it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called 'Real Socialism' leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization" (no. 35). ("Real Socialism" means, of course, Marxist socialism or communism.)

I should also raise the issue of how Fr. Sirico and his

colleagues are misrepresenting others' opinions in their effort to promote classical liberalism. For example, on their website they have a section called "In the Liberal Tradition," in which they feature various thinkers whom they assert to be fellow liberals. Let us look at just two of them. First, St. Thomas Aquinas. They represent him as a liberal by quoting some of his words in favor of private ownership of property. By this preposterous method they might as well feature Chesterton and Belloc, both bitter critics of capitalism, but strong defenders of private property. In any case, I think Fr. Sirico knows that to defend private property (as I myself do) by no means places one in the camp of classical liberalism, but simply indicates that one is not a Communist.

Equally ludicrous is C. S. Lewis, whom they claim as one of their own, apparently on the strength of favorable comments that he made about democracy and against unlimited government. They rather ignore the following words of Lewis from *Mere Christianity*:

All the same, the New Testament, without going into details, gives us a pretty clear hint of what a fully Christian society would be like. Perhaps it gives us more than we can take. It tells us that there are to be no passengers or parasites: if man does not work, he ought not to eat. Every one is to work with his own hands, and what is more, every one's work is to produce something good: there will be no manufacture of silly luxuries and then of sillier advertisements to persuade us to buy them. And there is to be no "swank" or "side," no putting on airs. To that extent a Christian society would be what we now call Leftist.

And in the next paragraph he says that we "should feel that its economic life was very socialistic. . . ." This part of Lewis's beliefs seems to have been conveniently overlooked.

It is far from clear how Fr. Sirico and other Catholic libertarians can justify their attempt to reconcile Catholic tradition with classical liberalism. Do they really believe that the Church's social teaching and tradition can change so easily as to make obsolete centuries of the papal magisterium? Are they really unaware that such notable Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century who turned their attention to economics, as G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Christopher Dawson and many others, were critics of capitalism? I cannot answer these questions. But what we can know is that the Acton Institute's promotion of liberalism is not something that can be embraced by an orthodox Catholic. Sirico, like Acton and Döllinger, is not a safe guide but rather a dissenter from the fullness of the Faith, a blind guide who will only lead followers into a pit. Please God, it will not be into the bottomless pit.

