

Afterword

John T. McGreevy

Abstract: In 1941, Jacques Maritain mused about writing a variation on the Federalist papers, this time keyed not only to approval of the United States constitution but for the “entire world.”¹ We could use such a document now, as democracies falter. Maritain, more than any other thinker, laid the groundwork for the Catholic Church’s endorsement of democracy. The task today, therefore, is to remember and also improve upon what Maritain once taught us.

EXILED TO NEW YORK CITY AS THE WEHRMACHT OCCUPIED France, Jacques Maritain asked his friend Yves Simon, also a philosopher exiled from France to the United States, where he was teaching at the University of Notre Dame, for a favor. Could he run to the library and confirm that Thomas Aquinas understood “that consent of the people is required for the legitimacy of the state”?²

Simon supplied the citation. Bitterly. Both Simon and Maritain knew that Catholic intellectuals around the world during the 1930s had admired Austria’s Engelbert Dolfuss, who had dissolved that country’s Parliament in an effort to build a “Catholic” state. Others lauded Portugal’s Antonio Salazar, a dictator and onetime Catholic youth leader, whose corporatist regime invoked *Rerum Novarum* while prohibiting independent trade unions or political parties. Salazar’s influence extended from Portugal to Brazil and across Latin America. Most Catholics supported Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War, and photos of Spanish bishops blessing the generalissimo became a staple of the Catholic press. In France itself, after the German occupation of the country in 1940, many Catholics, and probably a majority of Catholic intellectuals, rallied to the banner of the authoritarian Vichy government.

¹ Jacques Maritain to Yves Simon, October 3, 1941, in *Jacques Maritain, Yves Simon Correspondance. Tome 2: Les années américaines*, ed. Florian Michel (Tours: CLD, 2008), 76–77.

² This afterword draws upon material in John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022) and John T. McGreevy, “‘Natural Enemies’ No More: How Rome Finally Embraced Democracy,” *Commonweal*, July/August 2022, www.commonwealmagazine.org/natural-enemies-no-more. Reproduced with permission.

When Simon scanned this Catholic political landscape in 1941, he despaired. As he told Maritain, talking of Catholic democracy in this context was “only trash.” The antagonism of Catholics to democracy “is the problem we are asked to overcome.”³

A generation later, the problem of Catholic democracy seemed not a problem at all. The final document at the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), urged recognition of the fact that all people “individually or collectively, can take an active part in the life and government of the state.”⁴ During the 1980s and 1990s, Catholics in Brazil, Poland, the Philippines, South Korea, and Spain led movements for democratic reform, often invoking documents of the Second Vatican Council as they did so.⁵

The sentence on democracy in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) built upon decades of work by many hands, but perhaps the writings of Maritain most of all. In his 1936 masterpiece, *Integral Humanism*, Maritain had already outlined his Catholic and democratic vision. The flourishing of the human “person” required respect for her embeddedness in communities such as the family, professions, and churches. Catholics should not translate theological categories directly into politics and should instead welcome pluralism. Democratic governments with universal suffrage (for women as well as men) followed from this distinction between religious and political authority.

Maritain promoted his version of democratic personalism through ceaseless writing and traveling, from Germany to Canada, Poland, Argentina, Spain, and the United States. In Italy—where many Catholic intellectuals supported Mussolini into the late 1930s—Maritain’s ideas thrilled a cadre of young activists disenchanted with Il Duce, including Fr. Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI. Maritain also sailed to South America. In Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, his lectures attracted the country’s leading intellectuals. He persuaded the director of Brazil’s most influential Catholic think tank to identify himself as an “open Catholic, democratic, and reformist.”⁶

Exile in the United States from 1940 to 1944 deepened Maritain’s convictions. In 1941, he defended democracy as a system of government superior to any alternative. “It is necessary to show,” he

³ Yves Simon to Jacques Maritain, July 16, 1941, in *Maritain-Simon Correspondence*, tome 2, 64–66.

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 75.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 12–34, doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0016.

⁶ Michael Löwy and Jesús García-Ruiz, “Les sources françaises du christianisme de la libération au Brésil,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 42 (1997): 14–18, doi.org/10.3406/assr.1997.1120.

told Yves Simon, that “St. Thomas was a democrat, in this sense . . . the Gospel works in history in a democratic direction.”⁷

Pope Pius XII himself almost certainly drew on Maritain's writings. In his 1944 Christmas address, after several caveats, the pope announced that “the democratic form of government” now appeared “to many as a postulate of nature imposed by reason itself.” One of Maritain's friends, a distinguished Swiss theologian, archly noted “numerous coincidences” between the papal address and Maritain's prose.⁸

After the war, Maritain played an important role in the UNESCO committee that helped draft the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, Maritain's ideas underwrote one of the key achievements of twentieth century political history: Christian Democratic parties. After almost a century of doubting the efficacy of democracy, at least in Europe and Latin America, Catholics became its guarantors. For all or part of the period between 1945 and 1980, Christian Democratic parties held power in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. Even parties not formally identified as Christian Democratic—such as the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* in France, the Democratic Party in Uganda, the *Indische Katholieke Partij* in Indonesia, or the *Fianna Fáil* in Ireland—adopted parallel language as they pushed for family allowances, encouraged trade unions and urged Catholics to participate in democratic governance.

Not only Catholics belonged to Christian Democratic parties, and they were never controlled by the institutional church. Maritain himself never became active in a political party. But the lineage is direct. By 1960, the list of Catholic presidents and prime ministers influenced by Maritain was striking. It included Konrad Adenauer (West Germany) and Alcide de Gasperi (Italy), leaders of Europe's most prominent Christian Democratic parties. It included Robert Schuman (Prime Minister of France in 1947–1948 and later head of the European Parliamentary Commission), and Charles de Gaulle (France), who corresponded with Maritain while mobilizing Free French forces in London during the war and appointed Maritain as French ambassador to the Holy See in 1945. It included Presidents Léopold Senghor (Senegal), raised in the French empire, and Prime Minister Benedicto Kiwanuka (Uganda) raised in the British empire. By 1970 such a list would have included Eduardo Frei (Chile), Rafael

⁷ Jacques Maritain to Yves Simon, June 15, 1941, in *Maritain-Simon Correspondance*, tome 2, 60–62.

⁸ “Pope's Christmas Message, 1944,” *Catholic Mind* 43 (1945), 68; Charles Journet to Jacques Maritain, April 5, 1945, in *Journet-Maritain Correspondance*, ed. Msgr. Pierre Magie and Georges Cottier, OP (Fribourg: Saint-Augustin, 1996), tome 3, 310.

Caldera (Venezuela), and Pierre Trudeau (Canada). It did not include John F. Kennedy (United States) whose intellectual formation was innocent of Catholic social thought, but it did include his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps and the War on Poverty, and the Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, famous for his opposition to the Vietnam War. It even included Joseph R. Biden, Sr., father of a future United States President. Maybe it is not true, as President Biden told journalist David Brooks, that his working-class father read Maritain in the 1950s. But President Biden's remembering, or even misremembering, remains significant.⁹

The decision of the editors of the *Journal of Moral Theology* to dedicate an issue to Maritain and democracy conveys our distance from this soothing narrative. The contemporary democratic crisis is now acutely felt. Catholic leaders in Poland edge toward authoritarianism, and voters in the heavily Catholic Philippines elect a dictator disdainful of civil liberties. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in their superb *How Democracies Die*, identify markers of democratic decline. They observe how in the 1930s hierarchical Catholicism rested uneasily next to democratic politics. Some Catholic leaders—as in Belgium—actively resisted authoritarianism. Others—as in Austria, Portugal, Brazil, and Argentina—welcomed it.¹⁰

The fine essays in this special issue probe the question of democracy and Catholicism in multiple ways. I will not rehearse their many individual merits, but will note that the cumulative effect is to place democracy near the center of Catholic social thought. We should not take this for granted. For much of the twentieth century democracy was the dog that did not bark in Catholic social thought. The term did not appear in *Rerum Novarum* (1891) or *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Even in the 1970s, as noted in some of the essays in this volume, liberation theologians dismissed Maritain's focus on democracy and human rights as a form of complacency in societies marked by grave inequalities.

These criticisms of Maritain have rich roots in the French *nouvelle théologie*, and also reflect the particular situation of Latin America in the 1970s.¹¹ But in the current moment they seem less compelling than another project: connecting Catholic social thought to democratic

⁹ David Brooks, "Has Biden Changed? He Tells Us," *New York Times*, May 20, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/opinion/joe-biden-david-brooks-interview.html.

¹⁰ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Cambridge, MA: Broadway, 2018), esp. 26–29.

¹¹ Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

theory. The immediate challenge is not to narrow the distance between theology and politics, as Gustavo Gutiérrez and his disciples once desired, but to justify self-government in theological terms. The focus in the last generation of Catholic social thought on particular issues—most notably abortion—has obscured the importance of compromise, negotiation, and the acceptance of unpredictable outcomes. Too often the tone has been prophetic, not pragmatic, a difficult rhetorical stance in a pluralist society.

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¹² Jacques Maritain to Yves Simon, October 3, 1941, *Maritain-Simon Correspondance*, tome 2, 76–77.