

Can a Catholic be a Conservative?

A consideration of the oldest order—the order written into our natures.

By Benjamin Wiker

Can a Catholic be a conservative? This is an important question at this particular time in America. The US is currently in the throes of a significant conservative movement. Yet it is not a question tied to a particular moment in history. Conservatism, at its best, is tethered, not to particular movements, but to what Russell Kirk called “the permanent things.” When I ask, “Can a Catholic be a conservative?” I am pointing to a consideration of conservatism in this way.

To clarify even further, I am not asking, “Can a Catholic be a Republican?” Republicans *may* be true conservatives, but when we scratch below the surface not very many are. They are more likely to be party men, either confused about what conservatism really is or simply wearing conservative colors for votes.

Nor am I asking, “Can a Catholic join the Tea Party movement?” That is an interesting question, but the Tea Party movement is largely one of reaction against the policies of the Obama administration, rather than one determined by adherence to some deeply thought-out, firmly-held positive principles.

We must also be aware, in asking our question, that America is not the world, and that the Catholic Church is a universal Church, transcending all nations and their particular interior political struggles. A sign of this is that the question, “Can a Catholic be a conservative?” means something entirely different elsewhere. In Europe, “conservative” long meant those who stood by the old order of rule by kings, queens, and titled nobility. In any particular country anywhere, the question will tend to mean, “Do I stand by the old order?” whatever the type or caliber of that old order might be.

Each nation’s particular historical situation is different. “Conservative” can often mean little more than a wish for the old order, whatever it may have been, when the wisher remembers himself to have been in better circumstances. The old order may or may not have been truly conservative, and true conservatism is something that runs deeper than any particular political order, even while it must be understood from within some particular order. We are looking to the oldest order, the order written into our very nature as human beings, the permanent things regarding our true good and happiness that should define every political order.

Since one of the signal traits of conservatism is that it begins with the particulars before its own eyes rather than leaping to abstractions, I’ll be approaching the question from within the American scene in the familiar language of our political discourse. But since conservatism is something much deeper, older, and wiser, I’ll be using principles gathered from what has rightly been called the perennial philosophy, the philosophy grounded in a consideration of the permanent things.

Let's begin with the easy and obvious. Conservatism is generally associated with "traditional morality"—the primacy of the family, the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman, the rejection of sexual libertinism, and opposition to pornography, abortion, euthanasia, and the aimless, endless scientific manipulation of human nature. For Catholics, this isn't "traditional" morality, but natural morality, that is, the natural law. Monogamy isn't right, for example, because it's traditional—for many societies, polygamy and concubinage are traditional. It's right because it conforms to our nature as human beings made, male and female, in the image of God.

Here, Catholicism supplies an important clarifier to contemporary conservatives. It is historically correct to say that the Catholic Church, in fact, supplied all the great moral clarifiers to the west. Christianity was born into the culture of pagan Rome, where there was easy divorce and even easier sex, homosexuality and even homosexual marriage, concubinage and contraception, abortion and infanticide, and not just the right to euthanasia but even the duty to commit suicide under certain circumstances. The rise of Christianity, and its saturation and moral transformation of the dissolving pagan empire changed all that. When conservatives defer to "traditional" morality they should realize that the only reason it became traditional in the west is that it was considered natural by the Catholic Church.

And we therefore come to the obvious point. Catholics must be conservatives morally, for they are conserving the natural moral order as defended by their own Church. Any politician of whatever party who supports the chipping or trading away of essential moral principles cannot receive the support of a Catholic voter, even and especially when the chipper and trader proclaims himself or herself to be a Catholic. But for the very same reason, Catholics cannot support the "libertarian" view, often confused with true conservatism, which focuses only on conservative economic principles and regards moral questions as politically inconsequential.

We turn now to a second conservative principle, one that is perhaps far easier for Americans to grasp given our particular history: the focus on the primacy of self-government as opposed to top-down manipulation and centralized control by the state. G.K. Chesterton best captured the essence of the thing. The principle of democracy, he avowed, can be explained in two propositions:

The first is this: that the things common to all men are more important than the things peculiar to any men ... And the second principle is merely this: that the political instinct or desire is one of these things which they hold in common ... The democratic contention is that government (helping to rule the tribe) is a thing like falling in love ... It is not something analogous to playing the church organ, painting on vellum, discovering the North Pole ... looping the loop, being Astronomer Royal, and so on. For these are things we do not wish a man to do at all unless he does them well. It is, on the contrary, a thing analogous to writing one's own love-letters or blowing one's own nose. These things we want a man to do for himself, even if he does them badly ... I know that some moderns are asking to have their wives chosen by scientists, and they may soon be asking, for all I know, to have their noses blown by nurses ... [But] the democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of

the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state. This is democracy, and in this I have always believed.

The Church has said much the same thing, although with less flare and whimsy, in the *Catechism*:

Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of *subsidiarity*, according to which “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. (paragraph 1883)

The principle of subsidiarity should remind us of the emphasis laid by American conservatives on the primacy of the family and local community, as against control by the federal government. For conservatives, government begins locally, with self-government. Their emphasis on liberty is not, at its best, merely negative—“Keep the feds out of our lives!”—but an attempt to ensure that the tasks and prerogatives that are rightly and better handled by folks on the familial, local, and state level are preserved. They want to make certain that their lives, their families, their labor, their local communities, and even their states do not become mere instruments, mere means, to the ends defined by federal bureaucracies and ambitious national politicians.

Thus, both American conservatives and the Catholic Church adamantly reject socialism and communism, where the individual, the family, and the local community are subsumed under the national government (even if that government would provide significant social order, wealth, health care, employment, etc.).

For Catholics, the principle of self-government is understood as part of the principle of subsidiarity, and has a root far deeper than politics itself. God has left the most terribly important things for us to do ourselves, not so we may do whatever we want, but because he gives us the moral burden and responsibility appropriate to creatures made in his image. Learning to govern ourselves politically is simply an extension of learning to govern ourselves morally. No one can be good for me. The more we are morally well-ordered, the less need there is for a coercive political order.

God could have made us like bees in a hive, governed by instinct rather than given the perilous gift of freedom. Things would work much more smoothly, to say the least. In fact, one suspects that the bees-in-a-hive dream is what often animates the imagination of socialists and communists who, second-guessing providence, try to take control of all familial, social, moral, economic, and political functions. But that is not the way of God, and hence, not a way the Church can affirm.

One suspects the socialist-minded of a certain kind of Church-envy, especially the socialist-minded *within* the Church who, consciously or unconsciously, think that the state would be better off if it were run by the kind of top-down, centralized, bureaucratic control they experience in the Church. But that is to forget the important distinction the Church itself makes between the

Church and the State, between the City of God and the City of Man, between the universal evangelical aim of the Church and the particular situations of each nation. Even more, it is to confuse the present existence of the overly-bureaucratized Church as it exists in America with the universal Church as it governs the world-wide faithful.

The larger Church regards the family, not the state, as “the *original cell of social life*.” It understands the family, and not the state, to be “a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit,” and considers the family to be “a *domestic church*.” The family is where our moral life begins, and where we, in fulfilling and failing in our duties as husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, will be most carefully judged. A state that takes upon itself these moral obligations through a socialist or welfare system—and even with good intentions—thereby robs individuals of the freedom and moral duty to fulfill them.

The principle of subsidiarity does not mean, we hasten to add, that the state should simply let people alone, even when they are in dire circumstances. Subsidiarity affirms that the government should “support it [a community of a lower order] in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.” But, as with true conservatism, the greater power is acting to supplement, not supplant the proper functions of the more local community.

That is in fact how the conservative American founders—the Anti-Federalists, by name—understood the powers of the federal government. The enumerated powers of the federal government in the Constitution were designed to supplement the primary governing powers of local and state governments, to do what the local and state governments could not do, rather than take over what they could and should do.

The most important economic principles have already been covered: the essential moral foundation of society and the principle of subsidiarity. The Church rejects any notion of economics that violates either one, be it a libertarian or capitalist view that is entirely indifferent to morality and insists that only economics is important, or a notion of the welfare state or state socialism that draws economic power and direction away from individuals, families, and local communities into itself.

The real conservative position is that economics is subordinate to morality, and that our economic activity is ultimately rooted in the family, in the fundamental and inalienable obligation of fathers and mothers to provide for their own children through their work, prudence, and planning. A centrally-planned economy or an economy that draws all power to a central government or a few gigantic multi-national corporations both violate the principle of subsidiarity by taking away economic freedom that is a proper expression of our fundamental moral obligation to provide for our families.

This allows us to gain a little economic clarity in the midst of a rather muddled debate. It is no secret that political conservatism, at least in the US, is associated with the championing of capitalism and the free market. As a matter of actual fact, all too many of those sending up three cheers for capitalism are actually not conservatives but cheerleaders for the economic interests of

enormous, powerful international corporations that are about as far removed from the concerns of the moral and economic good of local communities as one could get.

True economic conservatives—such as the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek—hate the concentration of economic power with the same animosity they level at the concentration of political power. For Hayek, the “free market” meant free from any collusion between big corporations and big government. He urged that economic power must be diffracted and thoroughly distributed throughout the political order, from bottom to top, and did so for four very important and very Catholic reasons.

First, the government should be a *means*, a mere *instrument*, “to help individuals in the fullest development of their individual personality,” rather than an end in itself. Centralizing economic power ensured that individuals would become means to government’s economic ends.

Second, Hayek considered economic freedom to be a subset of moral freedom. If someone takes that responsibility from us, they have stripped us of our moral nature.

Third, Hayek understood the importance of the virtue of prudence—the cardinal virtue that judges the best means to the right ends in *particular* circumstances. A distant power cannot judge particular economic circumstances of families and local communities. When it tries to supplant the prudence of local folks it can only do so as an extremely powerful but destructive giant that is too far away from the ground to see the details and therefore regularly crushes those it is trying to help.

Fourth, neither political nor economic powers are purified by their concentration into an all-embracing state. What actually happens is that such powers end up magnifying the errors, foibles, sins, and confusions of those wielding it on behalf of the state. Economic power should be returned to the local level, where individuals are rewarded for their own efforts and good judgments, and the bad effects of foolishness, confusion, error, and sin are localized as well.

Of course, what I have provide above is only a beginning, but I think it is a solid beginning—one that can allow Catholics to make some common cause with contemporary political conservatives, of whatever party, and act as much-needed purifiers and clarifiers. There is far more to Catholicism than one finds in conservatism, and far more to true conservatism than what I have been able to touch upon in this short essay. But given that this is, as it were, a conservative moment in American history, it may well be a Catholic moment as well. “Can a Catholic be a conservative?” The answer is yes, as long as he can separate what is properly worth conserving from what is only party politics and talk-show chatter.

Benjamin Wiker’s most recent book is *Ten Books Every Conservative Must Read, Plus Four Not To Miss and One Impostor* (Regnery, 2010).

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