

CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

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HOMAS JEFFERSON is the acknowledged author of the Declaration of Independence. It is to him that we owe the actual writing of those principles upon which the United States has flourished for more than one hundred and fifty years. Historians and philosophers would be grateful if they knew for certain the exact sources from which Jefferson derived his profound document. One of the nearest clues comes in the words of the Composer himself:

Neither aiming at originality of principles or sentiments, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind. All its authority rests on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversations, in letters, in printed essays, or elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc. . . .¹

In this humble confession, Thomas Jefferson is outstanding for his honesty and frankness. He openly declares that the principles were not original, nor were they copied from any particular writing. They were not even copied necessarily from the four men whom he mentioned. Nor would we be satisfied with those four sources. Aristotle taught that although monarchy is the ideal, the best attainable form of government seems to be an aristocracy, not of wealth nor of birth, but of intellect.² Aristotle expounded some excellent social theories, but he lacked in his paganism an appreciation of the later Christian message of brotherhood.³ Cicero's expressions are general. For him "res publica" is "res populi." Individuals, however, seems to slip from his mental grasp.⁴ That Jefferson read Locke and other philosophers is certain. There are many quotations from Locke in Jefferson's *Commonplace Book*. However, Locke studied at Oxford when Scholasticism was still very much alive there.

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *M. E.*, XVI, 117.

² Aristotle, *Politica*, IV, 7.

³ E. F. Murphy, S.S.J., M.A., *St. Thomas' Political Doctrine and Democracy*, (Catholic University, 1921), pp. 12, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Hooker was one of Locke's sources, and "Hooker is the medium through whom the ethical and political philosophy of Thomas Aquinas finds its way into the English popular thought."⁵

We are thus left in doubt as to the immediate, original and primary sources of the Declaration. Again, we turn to Jefferson, who says:

I know only that I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it. I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before.⁶

Here, Jefferson truly says he offered no new ideas or sentiments. This statement of the great president can be substantiated by showing that most of our first principles of government were well written as early as the Thirteenth Century. History shows that the doctrine of Jesus Christ had its effects on governments as well as individuals. Through the teachings of the Master, the creature became enlightened as to his supernatural end. Men were drawn into an intimate union with their God through the Sacraments of the New Law. Man's social and political ideals were greatly affected. He was freed from paganism and idolatry. He was taught to live by a noble bond of Charity which extended to God, his fellow-man and his country. St. Augustine in the fourth century gave us in writing the solid fundamentals of natural law and government.⁷ But St. Thomas Aquinas, with Aristotle as a basis, and supplementing St. Augustine, expounded a new and more adequate theory of government and law.⁸ Although volumes have been written on this subject, we shall only compare some of St. Thomas' social doctrines to those principles which are considered the solid basis of all our American Government:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.⁹

Thomas Jefferson stated that all men are created equal. From the writings of this great statesman it is apparent that he

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, VII, 304; (Ford Ed., X, 267.)

⁷ Moorhouse F. X. Millar, S.J., "The Origin of Sound Democratic Principles in Catholic Tradition," *Thought* (March 1928).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 617.

⁹ *Declaration of Independence.*

did not mean all men are absolutely equal. If we read the notes of Jefferson as the young lawyer, we would see that he had a good knowledge of the diversities and inequalities in human nature. He wrote on the conditions and circumstances of husbands and wives, the differences of masters and servants, etc.¹⁰ If all men are created equal, there would be no need of a variety of law to suit individual natures. Thomas Jefferson recognized this as a lawyer. Later, he wrote something that was more pertinent. He says:

nature by mental and physical disqualifications has marked infants and the weaker sex for the protection rather than the direction of government.¹¹

Again:

When we come to the moral principles on which the government is to be administered, we come to what is proper for all conditions of society.¹²

Society has its diversity of conditions through the diversity and inequalities of individuals. We may also say that Jefferson recognized that there are certain principles and laws to guide particular peoples, but the moral law is for all persons as rational beings. Therefore, those err who interpret Jefferson's words on equality literally and without qualification. That all men are not absolutely equal in all respects can be easily seen upon a perusal of Jefferson's works.

Going back five hundred years before the Declaration of Independence, we find St. Thomas Aquinas teaching sound doctrine on this subject of equality and inequality. The Angelic Doctor taught "by nature all men are equal."¹³ All rational beings are *essentially* equal. All men, without exception, have a spiritual soul which is their vital principle in forming their bodies. This composite being is capable of performing rational, sensitive and vegetative activities which are *basically* the same for all. No man is more man than another. Equality exists too in the fact that every human being enters this world with the stain of original sin; Jesus Christ and His Blessed Mother are the only exceptions to this punishment. There is also an equality among men in that all need grace to be raised to the supernatural life. In brief, St. Thomas taught equality existed among men in their

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Commonplace Book*, nos. 1-557.

¹¹ To John Hamden Pleasants, VII, 345; (Ford Ed., X, 303.)

¹² To Dupont de Nemours, VI, 591; (Ford Ed., X, 24.)

¹³ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 104, a. 5.

II *Sent.*, Dist. XLIV, q. 1., 3.

specific human nature. But among other things, he recognized that men are not equal according to their individual natures.¹⁴ There are the many circumstances of inheritance, education and environment which contribute towards man's individual nature. This is something over and above man's specific nature. The inequality among men in their individual natures is obvious. We daily behold some men who are more talented than others. Some can perform and accomplish tasks which would be impossible to others. Social background, temperament and character play a part in establishing individual inequalities. The Angelic Doctor holds that some men are blessed with better intellectual faculties than others. It is to the preëminent in natural understanding that the command should be intrusted.¹⁵ Thus, if there were no inequality, there could be no government, for as St. Thomas says:

. . . no creature could do anything for the good of another creature, unless there were plurality and inequality among creatures, because the agent must be other than the patient and in a position of advantage over it.¹⁶

We therefore sum up this point of inequality in the words of the Prince of Theologians, who says:

the good of order (which is better than isolated good) ought not to be wanting to the work of God; which good could not be, if there were no diversity and inequality of creatures. There is then diversity and inequality between creatures . . . by the special intention of God, wishing to give the creature such perfection as it was capable of having.¹⁷

The second outstanding principle, according to the Declaration, is:

men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."¹⁸

This is a most sublime statement from Thomas Jefferson. We must recall that he was accused of being a free-thinker; and he was said to have lost a second term as president because he did not affiliate himself with any Christian Church. But in his Declaration can be seen the nobility of his character. He acknowledges a Creator Who has blessed man with certain rights

¹⁴ *II Sent.*, Dist. XXXII, q. 2., a. 3.

II Sent., Dist. XVII, q. 2., a. 2.

Summa Theol., I, q. 91, a. 3.

Contra Gentiles, II, 81.

¹⁵ *Contra Gentiles*, III, 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 65.

¹⁸ *Declaration of Independence.*

upon which no government can infringe. Man has a right to direct the affairs of his private life. Man is entitled to liberty of conscience by his Creator. Thomas Jefferson was thus a staunch advocate for the rights of man.

Almighty God hath created the mind free, and free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint.¹⁹

Again he says :

the care of human life and happiness and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government.²⁰

More particularly, Jefferson wrote to General Kosciusko :

The freedom and happiness of man . . . are the sole objects of all legitimate government.²¹

From the natural law, man, by his very nature as a rational creature, derives certain rights. Man is endowed with the light of reason whereby he discerns what is good and what is evil. In brief, the natural law is nothing less than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.²² Consequently, says St. Thomas, in matters touching the internal movement of the will, man is not bound to obey his fellow-man, but God alone.²³ Man belongs to God inasmuch as he has his origin from Him. Paternal government can extend only to the things that appear in man externally, but divine government reaches also to interior acts and dispositions.²⁴ In this we see that the entire universe, including all creatures, comes under the providential plan of God. All is governed by the eternal law of God. Man participates in this eternal law by his very nature. There is, therefore, a natural moral law between God and creatures.²⁵ Man is bound to obey secular princes only in so far as his obedience is required by the order of justice.²⁶ God is the principle of our being and government in a far more excellent manner than one's parents or country.²⁷ Hence, man owes no subjection or obedience to his fellow-man or country in matters touching the na-

¹⁹ Statute of Religious Freedom, VIII, 454; (Ford Ed., II, 237, 1779.)

²⁰ R. to A. Maryland Republicans, VIII, 165. (1809).

²¹ V. 509, (M. 1810).

²² *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 104, a. 5.

²⁴ *Contra Gentiles*, III, 130.

²⁵ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 104, a. 6, ad 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 101, a. 3, ad 2.

ture of his body.²⁸ He is perfectly free and independent when it comes to natural rights. Man must look to God, his Creator and highest Governor, in all matters concerning his soul and the nature of his body. These affairs include his religion, conscience, choice of a state in life, the support and begetting of children, etc. Man has, then, a natural right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In these things, man must turn to God, by Whom he is taught either by the natural or the written law.²⁹

The third and the last of the greatest American principles is: that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.³⁰

Underlying this profound statement was the earnest effort of Thomas Jefferson and the Founders of the Nation to set up a representative government. Jefferson was a champion of the rights of the people. A few years after he wrote the Declaration, he wrote to President Washington:

No government has a legitimate right to do what is not for the welfare of the governed.³¹

Jefferson understood that it was futile to establish a government that did not recognize the natural rights of the people. He knew that consideration must not only be given the common good, but that the people must also consent. Later, he wrote:

The only orthodox object of government is to secure the greatest degree of happiness possible to the general mass of those under it.³²

St. Thomas, long before Jefferson, was an advocate and exponent of law, the common good and the rights of the governed. The law should take account of many things, as to persons, as to matters, as to times.³³

A law, properly speaking, regards first and foremost the order to the common good. Now to order anything to the common good, belongs either to the whole people, or to someone who is vicegerent of the whole people. And therefore the making of a law belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people; since in other matters the directing of anything to the end concerns him to whom the end belongs.³⁴

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 105, a. 5, ad 2.

³⁰ *Declaration of Independence.*

³¹ To Pres. Wash., III, 461; (Ford Ed., 103, M. 1792.)

³² To M. Van Der Kemp, VI, 45, M. 1812.

³³ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 96, a. 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 90, a. 3.

Again, the Saint says :

For a people who are free, and able to make their own laws, the consent of the people expressed by a custom counts far more in favor of a particular observance, than does the authority of the sovereign, who has not power to frame laws, except as a representative of the people.³⁵

These passages and others of the learned Saint indicate that he developed with clarity and profundity his doctrine on democracy. Maurice De Wulf summarizes tersely :

The doctrine of the sovereignty of the people is not a modern discovery at all; it is in direct harmony with the leading idea of the Scholastic political philosophy, that individuals are the only social realities, and that therefore, the state is not an entity outside of them.³⁶

As Catholics, we should know what our Church did for America. It was the Church who played the dominant rôle in the discovery of our lands. Her influence was felt in the civilization and Christianization of our country. In truth, America has borrowed from Catholic Capital far more than many know or admit. From the deep wells of profound and sublime doctrine, there has flown into America "living waters." America drank this water of the Catholic Church, whereby America in turn has become a font of nourishment and sustenance for others.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 97, a. 3.

³⁶ De Wulf, *Civilization and the Middle Ages*, p. 249.

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