

## A THEOLOGY OF EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP: A CATHOLIC APPROACH

I speak of ‘a Catholic approach’ to citizenship: of course not a separate ‘Catholic theology’ of citizenship’. There is no separate Catholic body of thinking on citizenship, only characteristic emphases, often communitarian (consistent with Catholic sacramental theology etc). I suppose that what I and my colleagues *share* today will be far more substantive than any points of divergence.

The notion of the ‘individual without relationships’ is an analytic abstraction. When Cain is punished by exile, he laments, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! . . . I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me’. He can just about imagine life without belonging (which to him means tribal belonging) and that life is unendurable. However no **specific** community of belonging is self-justifying. Perhaps families are as basic to fulfilment today as the tribe was to Cain, yet plenty of reject the family, at least temporarily (the disciples are called to do this by Jesus), or resent the family’s demands. Second, even if the family is counted as ‘the basic unit of society’, permissible *models* of family are nowadays fiercely contested, and they are subject to political definition.

Citizenship, too, resists any single definition, and has taken very different forms at different times, from Greek city-states to the EU. The Treaty of Lisbon speaks of *citizenships*, plural.<sup>1</sup> But at least the term *citizenship* denotes that the citizen belongs, and is **recognised** to belong, to a specific political community, and denotes the citizen’s **dignity** in such belonging. Second, membership brings rights, privileges and responsibilities. According to the Council of Europe, ‘Citizenship, in the widest sense, is a *right* and indeed a *responsibility* to participate in the cultural, social and economic life and in public affairs of the community together with others.’<sup>2</sup>

In the case of European citizenship there is obviously a constitutional debate to be had about its relationship to national citizenship: but this is hardly a *theological* question. The two major debates about citizenship, sufficiently foundational to be called theological, appear to me to derive from:

1. the relationship of this specific form of belonging, *citizenship*, with other forms;
2. the nature of ‘citizenship-belonging’ on the part of a human person endowed with freedom & moral responsibility, who has with a unique personal destiny, a vocation to be creative not merely passive, and a human solidarity without any possible institutional limits.

### I. Citizenship and other forms of human belonging

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Treaty on European Union stipulates, “every national of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union shall be additional to and not replace national citizenship” (TEU, art.9). In other words, all EU nationals belong to a double political order, as their passports indicate.

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, “Living Together as Equals in Dignity”*, sec 4.2: CM(2008)30 final, 2 May 2008, [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper\\_final\\_revised\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf). (In your papers, the CSC includes its own fuller, balanced, definition.)

1. Since belonging is intrinsic to our humanity (and is not some failure in our personal autonomy or psychological individuation) the structures that express belonging can authentically express our humanity. In Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle describes the family unsentimentally, as the association ‘established by nature to supply for our everyday wants’: families cluster together in villages, which can be ‘nearly or quite self-sufficing’. The state, though, exists not merely to provide the necessities of life but ‘for the sake of *a good life*’. The state is ‘natural’, since it is the **purpose** of the more rudimentary associations, their full development (I, 1252-53): and for Aristotle, the intrinsic *telos* of something is part of its nature. Persons in isolation can be neither happy (since happiness, *eudaemonia*, is expressed by living well *in the social world*) nor virtuous (since virtue or excellence (*arete*) supposes the public world that calls it forth). That is why man is a political animal. However conversely, one cannot **contribute** ‘noble actions’ to the state except from one’s own moral freedom and creative capacities.<sup>3</sup>
  
2. I cite Aristotle, of course, because in this matter he was followed, though critically, by Thomas Aquinas, in arguing that human beings need to associate with each other not only for subsistence and self-defence, but for their full intellectual and moral development.<sup>4</sup> But whereas Aristotle identified a class of ‘natural slaves’ (in addition to slaves by unfortunate extrinsic circumstance such as conquest) Aquinas **denied** the existence of natural slaves.<sup>5</sup> Thus the rights and responsibilities of citizenship cannot not reserved to an elite.
  
3. Citizenship is one among other forms of social belonging, etc of which expresses different dimensions of our being and each of which makes rightful demands on us. These demands come into tension (citizenship versus kinship, or citizenship versus religious community), and the resolution of the tension depends on specific contexts, and on processes of human discernment (therefore, of spiritual freedom). In war, for example, the state may legitimately require someone to combat cousins or fellow believers. Family networks, a child’s basic needs for a parent, religious fellowship, are all brutally disrupted - as far as death. **And yet:** it is essential that citizenship be held in healthy tension with other modes of social membership. Any claim to absoluteness turns it into a dangerous idol. Consider these provisions of the *Settlement of Westphalia*, 1648:
  - governments of states, inheriting the former powers of princes are the only possessors of sovereignty;
  - there is no ‘international law’ as such, only treaties signed by sovereign states;
  - war between sovereign states is a legal means of resolving differences (this being, I suppose, the ideological legitimation of *cuius regio, eius religio*)

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Our conclusion, then, is that political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of mere companionship. Hence they who contribute most to such a society have a greater share in it than those who have the same or a greater freedom or nobility of birth but are inferior to them in political virtue; or than those who exceed them in wealth but are surpassed by them in virtue.’ *Politics*, Book III, Part 9)

<sup>4</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, ed William P. Baumgarth, and Richard J. Regan, *On Law, Morality and Politics*, Hackett Publishing, (Cambridge, Mass, 1988, Appendix, pp.282-83

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, ST II-II, Q. 57, Art 3., pp.140-41. In theological terms, we all have the dignity of being children of God: in Kantian terms no one may be instrumentalised simply for another’s purpose.

If the true God is one who gives his life for humanity, the idol is something that **demand**s the sacrifice of our life, and that day by day diminishes our humanity. We know that states can become idols. (So can families. So can money.)

4. I have said that in ancient Greece, citizenship was a privilege reserved to an elite. Not only in ancient Greece! The philosopher Michael Walzer has stressed that citizenship is **not** the entirety of legitimate social belonging: 'indeed the rule of citizens over non-citizens, or members over strangers, is probably the most common form of tyranny in human history'.<sup>6</sup> Here we can use the non-denominational term 'catholic', *universal*. Citizenship in a Catholic perspective necessarily involves a critique of *existing modes of citizenship*, since our primary belonging is to humanity.

## II: Citizenship and human freedom/responsibility

1. I mentioned critique. Critique entails both membership and critical distance. Here we can start from the second major way in which Aquinas goes beyond Aristotle. Human beings have a purpose / *telos* **beyond** temporal well-being. Since we are social beings that presumes not an exclusive individual relationship to God but a different form of membership: in his case, that of the Church (in a broad definition). So the question always arises of the right relationship between these 'natural' and 'supernatural' purposes: in eloquent Protestant terms, perhaps, between Bonhoeffer's dimensions of the 'penultimate' and the 'ultimate'. The natural is not less important than the supernatural, or the penultimate less important than the ultimate, any more than Jesus proposes the love of neighbour to be 'less important' than the love of God. The two dimensions are mutually dependent and are incommensurable. Human freedom is both **for** the common good which is the proper objective of the political, and **transcends** - in both 'natural and supernatural dimensions. Everything is political, but it is not good even for politics to imagine that it is 'everything'.
2. So we stress social responsibility (though not at the cost of individual obligations). Karl Rahner has reflected that in pre-modern ages, social structures changed more or less imperceptibly, so that people scarcely reflected upon the nature of their society, or its capacity for change. [cf. *The Letter to Philemon*.] Now we refuse to see that system of social coordinates as fixed, and we know we can change it. Thereby every Christian's vocation to love of neighbour now implies our shared responsibility for the social structures required for a life worth living. A Christian may be conservative and need not be ashamed of it (some features of existing society are no doubt worth preserving). But Christians may not act as if achieving sociopolitical change were simply somebody else's business or as if 'the defence of prevailing social structures, subject as they are (just as future structures will be) to sin, finitude, and human disappointment, were the only viable Christian task'.<sup>7</sup>
3. We also stress responsibilities as a necessary complement to the citizenship rights emphasises above all in the European Treaties. Rights are crucial and non-negotiable. But the modern **rights-driven** approach to citizenship turns the European project into the instrument of individual and national claims of welfare freedom and welfare which are assumed to be prior, quasi-absolute. Such

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 62

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbour*, St. Paul's. London, pp. 90-91

citizenship seeks *benefits* from Europe without cultivating any sense of responsibility and commitment. The *quality* of citizenship is threatened. Responsibility operates first to ensure that our concern for others' rights is no less than our concern for our own. A sense of 'responsibility-driven citizenship' - is needed to create enable a sense of *sacrifice (self-giving) offered in freedom* (Christians are not embarrassed by such terms) and a generous solidarity. To put this in a way that is typically Catholic: responsible citizenship aims to fulfil the *telos* of politics which is justice and the common good: and the common good (unlike the utilitarian 'greatest good of the greatest number') starts with the good of the poor and excluded.

4. If 'politics is not everything': neither obviously is the state. Some political models tend to absorb civil society into the sphere of the State. The 'catholic' commitment seeks the common good through solidarity and **subsidiarity**. The subjectivity and the creativity of citizens is as important as their loyalty - and must be respected and fostered for the state itself (or the EU) to flourish. We have always to **discern** the frontiers between the political community as a 'structure of grace' (in service of justice and the common good) and as 'a structure of sin': Such discernment is not a rejection of the city, state, EU, but a deeper contribution to its life and its truth.

So we still need the testimony of the famous second-century *Letter to Diognetus*, with which I end. Speaking of the 'manners of the Christians, the letter says:

As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. . . They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. To sum up all in one word - what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.