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Can a Catholic be Liberal? Roman Catholicism and Liberalism in a Political Economy Perspective (1800–1970)

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Abstract

In the Nineteenth century Enlightenment philosophy and modern political thought found tough opposition in the Roman Catholic Church. Liberalism was associated with Free Masons and revolutionary intent. Nonetheless, liberalism and political economy induced the Church to develop some theoretical analysis and specific theoretical positions in terms of social philosophy and social economics. This paper presents an analysis of encyclical letters and writings of Catholic scholars, to elaborate on the theoretical points used to contrast liberalism. Compromises, as well as turning points in the evolution of the Catholic position, are investigated. Lastly, the epistemological and historical reasons for the affinity of Roman Catholicism with ethical liberalism and the limits of this similarity are discussed.

JEL: A12; B55; N30; Z12;

1. Liberal and Catholic, an Italian drama

The relationship between religion and political economy involves many interesting historical, cultural, and philosophical issues that can become real existential concerns for intellectually aware people. Italy, as the center of Roman Catholicism, is still suffering from a bad conflict of conscience that arose during modernity: the overlapping of political-economic and religious beliefs. The solution, as we know, is that contradictory beliefs do not represent a serious practical concern for a good life. On the contrary, they supply fuel for challenging intellectual debates, keeping scholars' boredom away.

Augusto Del Noce (1946) began one of his short articles, asking, «Can a Catholic be liberal? And a liberal be Catholic?» His reflection led to an affirmative answer. Del Noce's position was a reaction to some negative opinion expressed by Benedetto Croce in his political history (1931; 1938). After the Second World War, the birth of the Christian Democratic parties raised these issues¹ and found the contribution of Maritain (1933; 1943), De Ruggiero, and many others. Croce argued that Catholic philosophy has the form of *idealism, which is not compatible with the epistemology of liberalism*. Therefore, he highlighted an epistemological gap that could not be overlooked.² However, it is impossible to deny that the Catholic religion considers the principle of liberty the fundamental root of the value of the person.

The problem is complicated, on the one hand, by the difficulty in defining liberalism, and, on the other, by a long historical tradition of dissent by the Church with regard to the development of actual political liberalism. Actually, the development of social Catholicism was conceived as a political perspective in opposition to liberal regimes and socialism.³ Therefore, from a historical perspective, even when the *ancien régime* was over, the Roman Church has always attempted to build some *third way*, considering the liberal ideal a rationalistic mistake and an odd political philosophy.⁴ In general, the intellectual interaction was not between Catholic theology and political economy but between Catholic moral philosophy and political philosophy. As concerns political economy, it is certainly more a political rather than an economic problem.

The study attempts, first, to single out the relevant features of the varieties of liberalism that may represent a more or less acceptable political perspective for a Catholic. In the second section, the historical change in the attitude of the Church, following the modification of context, is briefly presented. Then, the main Church's documents on liberalism are discussed in theoretical terms to determine what has officially been said and why. The central issues are discussed, focusing on the difference between liberty and freedom and on different individualisms.

2. Liberal what?

Liberalism, as a political ideology and movement, originally developed in opposition to the *ancien régime*, intended as the hierarchical and authoritarian model of integration of theological-political power. In that regime, in Continental Europe, religion represented the main cultural public space and had a monopoly on life's moral narrative. In general, the modern world has seen a constant attempt to push religion into the private sphere of the individual, emancipating politics and economic actions from the cogent moral regime. Can we, in times of genetically modified organisms, have a hybrid called Catholic liberalism? Over the course of time, liberalism has found different theorizations and applications. Actually,

¹ Particularly in the context of their adhesion to the Western block.

² In general, liberals and even more libertarians are in difficulty understanding practical science. Catholics see a limited extent for abstract modelling.

³ The identity of the Catholic socialist (worst if communist) was even more troubled than the liberal, of course, and represented a specular drama.

⁴ See Almodovar and Teixeira (2008) and Solari (2007; 2010a).

many economists and philosophers did not find any contradiction in this double intellectual identity: Bastiat, Périn, Einaudi, Schumpeter are just some examples of liberal scholars with an evident root in Catholicism.⁵

Consequently, liberalism should be analyzed and précised in its founding ideas to study how much it contrasts with the Catholic vision of person and society. To this problem, we can add another concern, clearly expressed by Villey:

«...very few non-Catholics are able or competent to understand what Catholicism is,... Conversely, very few Catholic theologians really know what economic liberalism is or are acquainted with the way in which the market economy functions» (Villey, 1959: 251).

Besides this ascertainment, Villey (1959) accused non-liberal Catholics of being ignorant of how markets operate and of economic theory in general. His critique, however, was superficial and incapable of getting into the scientific fundamentals of both positions. The result is a series of theory-free accusations.⁶ The Christian religion, however, provides no social recipe. The New Testament provides no insights into the right political-economic organization of society (differently from Judaism and Islamism). In this way, a confrontation makes no sense, as the two systems are «situated existentially at different levels» (Villey, 1959: 252). Nonetheless, Roman Catholicism has produced a well-developed corpus of social theories in strict adherence to its moral philosophy, which is based on solidarity and not on individualism. From that perspective, Catholic liberals are seen as suffering from some form of schizoid pathology.

Liberalism is simply based on the ideas of liberty and individual autonomy, and on these elements, it constitutes its ethical dimension. It states the unlimited sovereignty of the individual as a natural rights holder. Liberalism supports the idea that the individual is the only one who knows what is good for him/her. This is obviously in contrast with any 'communitarian' view as the Roman Catholic, stating that people have some natural obligation toward their next and that defines what is good through instituted processes. Liberalism also tends to abandon *virtue ethics* for some form of consequentialism. Liberals believed that the political incorporation of religion did not succeed in improving humanity without coercion. The only solution had to be individualization and the combination of religious sentiment and ethical views into the individual sphere. Liberalism involves some morals of responsibility and is against the morals of conviction (as they often define Catholicism). Pluralism and relativism appear to be indispensable elements of liberalism, but they are highly problematic in the Catholic religion. Cubeddu (2003) asked how it is possible to make the finalism of human nature compatible with the non-finalism of the market and political institutions. The common good, universal ethical principles, and the universal destination of goods are prominent principles in the toolkit of Catholic scholars and are difficult to combine with liberalism. Nonetheless, they have been reframed and interpreted differently in the course of history.

Social Catholicism can be seen as a scientific counter-reaction to liberalism. Even if for most of the Nineteenth century most of Continental Europe was far from being a "liberal society", liberalism was acquiring a certain political hegemony. The economy of that century can be best described as being in a state of transition lacking the suitable institutions that would have granted a certain sustainability to the process of industrialization. Catholic scholars did not express a position against markets and freedom of choice, but had a different view of the position of man in society (besides a political position to preserve).

⁵ We can add De Tocqueville, Lord Acton, and Sturzo to this group (Antiseri, 2010), except that they were not exactly economists.

⁶ Cubeddu also argued that the critics of Catholics to the market lack technicality. They are based on consequences and not on theoretical points (Cubeddu, 2003: 193).

Students of liberalism as Nadia Urbinati (2013) and Catherine Audard (2009) have pointed out a number of fundamental points that identify liberalism:

- 1) *individual sovereignty*, particularly autonomous moral judgments and the self-awareness of individual rights, including the idea of *liberty of the moderns* (no constraints);
- 2) the constitutional state to set limits to public powers;
- 3) the primacy of free market as an allocation mechanism.

The constitutional state has been gradually accepted by the Church over the course of history, even though the priority of formal law over morals is still a problematic issue. Freedom of conscience as the central point of liberalism surely clashes with Catholicism, which is framed by a hierarchically coordinated system of interpretation of what is good.

Michael Freedman (1996) argued that liberalism is based on three layers of concepts of different importance, which can be arranged differently to give birth to different forms of liberalism. The fundamental concepts are liberty and individuality (individualism has both a positive and normative character). Adjacent liberal concepts are democracy, equality, social justice, and the role of the state. Lastly, peripheral concepts are often borrowed from other ideologies. This hierarchy of ideas clearly allows us to mix some liberal fundamentals with some more superficial principles borrowed from religion (e.g., social liberalism or ethical liberalism as that of Tocqueville).⁷ However, religion has its fundamental concepts on the status of the person producing some clash with the liberal core: Is this clash viable?

Catholic economist Francesco Vito (1947) believed that economic liberalism is incompatible with Catholicism because competition cannot be the main regulating form of society. However, the neo-liberal economist Wilhelm Röpke ascertained the similarity of Catholicism and his liberalism, as they both refer to the political principles that defend the individual from political authority's abuses. However, he was almost the only one to frame neo-liberalism in this direction.⁸

Still, on ways of classifying and analyzing liberalism, Giordano (2010) considered Bernard Manin's⁹ distinction between "market liberalism," based on constitutions to control power (with a clear distinction between the private and the public sphere) and "counterbalancing powers' liberalism" obtained by fragmentation of powers (represented by Montesquieu, Madison, and Tocqueville, characterized by a fuzzy distinction between public and private in the classic, non-Roman tradition). By contrast, Sidentop (1979) proposed a distinction between English liberalism, focusing on the political sphere and underestimating civil society, and Continental liberalism, following a sociological and historical approach to political theory, which was deeply focused on the idea of civilization. A part of the latter developed a subjectivist approach to economic decision-making that is open to including moral evaluations, better than other approaches. However, this distinction tends to focus on peripheral concepts and not on the core of the issue.

Catherine Audard (2009) focused on the basic distinction between Locke's and Hobbes' classic liberalism, forming subsequent developments of this approach. In particular, the tradition of Locke and its anthropological and political insights allow for the best comparison with the Catholic view. Other approaches, such as those of Hobbes and utilitarian theory, are more evidently at odds with it.

In general, it is difficult to distinguish the historical from the theoretical level because theory evolves in response to societal and political changes. Often, major arguments have been developed as an answer to contingent problems. Moreover, we find Catholic political or

⁷ Audard (2009: 31) argues that liberalism, also in its social declination, is not a socialism because equality has a different sense in it.

⁸ Röpke liberalism gave priority to social integration compared to efficiency (Resico and Solari, 2019). Many liberals can be included in the category of 'social liberalism', but the exact meaning of 'social' is always not well-framed.

⁹ In an essay titled "The Two Liberalisms" published in 1985 in *Problemi del Socialismo* VII (3-4): 45-62.

social economists with different orientations. In what follows, some short stories of the evolving attitude of the Church and its scholars are traced.

2. The changing attitude of the Church

In Continental Europe, the French Revolution represented a crucial point in the process of breaking the theological–political power. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church hoped to reconstitute the unitary political regime of the preceding century. By the middle of that century, after notable hesitations due to the Revolution of 1848, social Catholicism had to progressively accept the constitutional state and rebuild a bottom-up approach to social systems. Secularization took place at different times with different intensity in different places (Faccarello, 2017). Nonetheless, the Church could not accept that individual sovereignty would lead to autonomous moral judgments. Consequently, Catholic scholars developed an autonomous view of political economy and social reform aiming to go beyond the ideas of liberalism and socialism. They proposed a "third way" based on a different epistemology based on Catholic anthropology and old natural law. Therefore, they began from the idea of the *necessary sociability of man*, interpreting economic choice as integrating a plurality of action motives beyond simple self-interest. In this way, they could consider different allocation mechanisms within society. However, the most difficult theoretical task was the integration of freedom with law and communitarian morals, whereas liberalism kept such elements sharply apart. The result was an *ethical economy* perspective magnifying the role of civil society and social institutions in the coordination of individual decision plans. This led to a *corporative economy* that in the second half of the Twentieth century gave birth to the mixed economy (Solari, 2010; Figuera and Pacella, 2021; Sandonà and Solari, 2021).

Nonetheless, we have a number of Catholic scholars that produced liberal theories. In the middle of the Nineteenth century, Charles Périn adopted a liberal-paternalistic approach, but that was not the way followed by the Vatican. Before him, Antonio Rosmini produced a large amount of philosophical, political and anthropological studies that worked as a context for a liberal Catholic theory, but he did not produce explicitly any economic study (his ideas could be seen as forerunner of the Austrian school). Some of his moral principles found the disapproval of the Pope (Leo XIII in 1887 officially condemned with *Post Obitum* forty sentences in the works of Rosmini).

After the loss of temporal power in Central Italy (1870) with Leo XIII, the Vatican displayed a change in the attitude of encyclicals. The latter became more theoretical, explaining the principles and the reasons for dissent in more detail. Catholic social economists emphasized the social bases of markets and the role of a morally constrained "liberty". They also consistently highlighted the importance of collective action, the role of authority, and the principle of subsidiarity in the supply of public services. Therefore, Social Catholicism developed as a moral philosophy in which the social dimension of human action produces a relevant public dimension of economic processes. Finally, economic institutions had to be expression of practical reason and had to be shaped in a way to serve the common good.

The consequence is that social Catholicism adopted a different epistemology compared to liberalism and socialism, leaving abstract theory underdeveloped. Such epistemology was inherently social and favorable to bottom-up contributions to economic reform.

When Catholics directly entered politics in the twentieth century and, in particular, obtained a leading role after WWII, social Catholicism became a crucial "political culture" of the ruling classes in many European countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy, partially in France), helping the consolidation of liberal capitalism in the form of mixed economies in most of Europe.¹⁰

¹⁰ By the end of the 1970s, however, social Catholicism was accused of becoming an ideology, supporting progressive policies (Chenu, 1979).

3. The evolution of Church documents on liberalism

Looking at documents that express the official position of the Roman Church, encyclical letters, apostolic exhortations, messages, etc. from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth, we find little explicit reference to liberalism. Socialism and communism have often been the objects of criticism, while liberalism is criticized implicitly by referring to its constituting ideas. Modernism, republicanism, Jacobinism, and Enlightened philosophy are often the most precise targets of critics. The ideas of French enlightenment, which had been the object of censorship during the eighteenth century, when it was simply considered heresy, increasingly became the main focus of criticism and condemnation when they became leading principles of actual political reforms.¹¹

Leo XII (1823–1929), in *Quo Graviora*, (March 13, 1826) addressed the problem of Free Masons (similarly to the previous lamentations of Clement XII, Benedict XIV, and Pius VII), who were accused of spreading false ideas and projecting hostile political changes. The content of these ideas, however, is not related to liberalism or any other more specific idea.

Pius VIII (1829–1830), in *Traditi Humiliati*, (May 24, 1829) pointed out «numberless errors and the teachings of perverse doctrines which, no longer secretly and clandestinely but openly and vigorously, attack the Catholic faith...revolt against religion through philosophy (of which they proclaim themselves doctors) and through empty fallacies devised according to natural reason» (Pius VIII, 1829: §3). The main problem of concern was *indifferentism*, which today we would name *relativism*,¹² interpreted from the point of view of religious belief, and the *harmful and pestiferous books* spreading irreligious ideas.

Gregory XVI (1831–1846) held a position strenuously against modernity and progress in general. *Mirari Vos* (August 15, 1832) was a reaction to the publication of *L'Avenir*, in which Félicité de Lamennais and some other intellectuals¹³ opened the way to *Catholic liberalism*. This encyclical letter has, as its target liberalism (cited only in the title), the State–Church separation and *indifferentism*. It is written against the «the insolent and factious men» (Gregory XVI, 1832: §14)¹⁴ that spread liberal theories. He argued that «academies and schools resound with new, monstrous opinions, which openly attack the Catholic faith» (Gregory XVI, 1832: §14). For what concerns liberalism, we can find an attack on liberty of conscience and freedom to publish: «absurd and erroneous proposition which claims that liberty of conscience must be maintained for everyone» (Gregory XVI, 1832: §14).¹⁵ «Nor can We predict happier times for religion and government from the plans of those who desire vehemently to separate the Church from the state» (Gregory XVI, 1832: §14). Therefore, it is the core of the liberal political ideology that is criticized, but it is not the economic aspect of liberalism, nor is liberalism distinguished from the variety of political theories favoring modernity and the evolution out of the *ancien régime*.

In *Singulari Nos*, June 25, 1834, Gregory XVI attacked again the mistakes of Félicité de Lamennais (mainly expressed in *Les Paroles d'un Croyant*). He found that «it corrupts the people by a wicked abuse of the word of God, to dissolve the bonds of all public order and to weaken all authority. It arouses, fosters, and strengthens seditions, riots, and rebellions in the empires. We condemn the book because it contains false, calumnious, and rash propositions which lead to anarchy» (Gregory XVI, 1834: 8). He added that «We speak here also of that

¹¹ On this argument, see Clark and Kaiser (2003).

¹² Indifferentism: «This perverse opinion is spread on all sides by the fraud of the wicked who claim that it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion, as long as morality is maintained» (Pius VIII, 1829: 3).

¹³ We mention Montalembert, Lacordaire, Gerbet, and de Coux, the latter author of one of the first manuals of social economy.

¹⁴ «We had to use Our God-given authority to restrain the great obstinacy of these men with the rod» (Gregory XVI, 1832: 14).

¹⁵ «cities renowned for wealth, dominion, and glory perished as a result of this single evil, namely immoderate freedom of opinion, license of free speech, and desire for novelty» (Gregory XVI, 1832: 14).

erroneous philosophical system which was recently brought in and is clearly to be condemned» (Gregory XVI, 1834: §8). However, again, the feeling is that the target is not liberalism as a coherent system of thought but rather any reform to move society away from the ancient social and political system. Therefore, we find the critique of some central tenets of liberalism, but the extent is limited to what concerns religious themes (indifferentism) and political themes—that is, the conservation of the old vision of society.

Pius IX (1846–1878) was immediately perceived as more favorable to change, but the Revolution of 1848 led him back to a more rigid attitude. Nonetheless, we can perceive a partial change of perspective yet in his first Encyclical Letter written on Nov. 9, 1846, and in two Allocutions delivered in Consistory, the one on Dec. 9, 1854, and the other on June 9, 1862. The letter *Qui Pluribus* (Nov. 9, 1846) is, again, against secret sects and the *unbridled license to think, speak, and write*. However, we can find some discussion on the right interpretation of reason to overcome the ideas of the Enlightenment: «They claim for themselves without hesitation the name of 'philosophers'... They feel as if philosophy, which is wholly concerned with the search for truth in nature, ought to reject those truths which God Himself... these enemies never stop invoking the power and excellence of human reason» (Pius IX, 1846: §5). Therefore, the Pope reaffirms the traditional interpretation of reason and the moral nature of naturalism. In the allocution *Quibus Quantisque* (April 20, 1849), written from the exile of Gaete, we can find a further attack on Free Masons. Similarly, in *Noscitis et Nobiscum* (Dec. 8, 1849, after political disorders), he blames secret sects for attempts to draw the Italian people to Protestantism.¹⁶ Here, we find the first citations of *Socialism* and *Communism*, which are considered misapplying the concepts of liberty and equality. However, if socialism is perceived as a specific political system, there is no blame for liberalism as such. The theme of the *right interpretation of reason* is, again, the central theme of the allocution *Singulari Quadam* (Dec. 9, 1854). Pius IX argued that the «worshippers of human reason, who set up reason as a teacher of certitude, and who promise themselves that all things will be fortunate under its leadership, have certainly forgotten how grave and terrible a wound was inflicted on human nature from the fault of our first parent; for darkness has spread over the mind, and the will has been inclined to evil» (Pius IX, 1854). Therefore, perfect rationality is seen as a mistaken assumption. Similarly, the allocution *Jamdudum Cernimus* (March 18, 1861) rejects modernity. However, there is no reference to the kind of spontaneous order theories of society coming from Scotland that constitute the real alternative to Catholic organicism.

In 1862, Pius IX published the well-known *Syllabus of Errors* (June 9), in which a set of modern mistakes were denounced:

- I. *Pantheism, naturalism, and absolute rationalism*", in which the only relevant point here is the third, where the idea that human reason – without any reference to God – is the sole arbiter of truth, good and evil is declared false, while stating that law which secures the welfare of men and of nations.
- II. *"Moderate rationalism"*;
- III. *"Indifferentism and latitudinarianism"*;
- IV. *"Socialism, communism, secret societies, biblical societies, clerico-liberal societies"*;
- V. *"Errors concerning the Church and her rights"*;
- VI. *"Errors on civil society..." among which is 39: the state as a source of all rights (that can be related to Hobbes)*;
- VII, *"Errors concerning natural and Christian ethics"*;
- VIII, *"Errors concerning Christian marriage"*;
- IX, *"Errors regarding the civil power of the sovereign Pontiff"*;
- X, *"Errors about modern liberalism", among which the point 77 argues that «In the present day, it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to*

¹⁶ After the attempted revolution of 1848, Pius IX favoured the development of Jesuit studies and the creation of *Civiltà Cattolica* that begun publications in 1952. The publication was critical of liberalism, but it developed, thanks to Taparelli, a position that remained compatible with it. Liberatore (1888) was also quite harsh toward liberalism, but his thought was less influential.

the exclusion of all other forms of worship». At point 80 liberalism is cited: «The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization» (Pius IX, 1862).

The actual reference is political liberalism, with a specific mention of *clerico-liberal societies*. Points V, IX, and X testify to the difficulty of adapting to changing political regimes. They testify the reluctance to any mingling with cultural and political liberalism.

In a few years (in 1870), the Church would lose its temporal domain, which would force a change of perspective.¹⁷ The following year, in *Quanto Conficiamur Moerore* (Aug. 10, 1863), there is some more interesting critique of the central points of economic theory. We can read a negative assessment of self-interest seen as the «most pernicious error... unbridled and damnable self-love and self-interest that drive many to seek their own advantage and profit with clearly no regard for their neighbor. We mean that thoroughly insatiable passion for power and possessions that overrides all the rules of justice and honesty and never ceases by every means possible to amass and greedily heap up wealth» (Pius IX, 1863: §11). Then, there is a condemnation of Liberal Clericals, which is a reference to Antonio Rosmini.¹⁸

Quanta Cura (Dec. 8, 1864) condemned some current errors: «deceptive opinions and most pernicious writings to raze the foundations of the Catholic religion and of civil society... applying to civil society the impious and absurd principle of 'naturalism'» (Pius IX, 1864). The fact that the liberty of conscience and worship is each man's personal right is defined as the *liberty of perdition*.

Leo XIII (1878–1903) was the pope who developed encyclical letters in a more explicit theoretical direction, and these documents became more interesting and precise sources of the political economy position of the Catholic Church on social and economic issues. The first letter, *Apostolici Muneris* (Dec. 28, 1878), however, is against the mistakes of socialism. *Diuturnum Illud* (June 29, 1881) is more interesting because it discusses the origin of civil authority. It proposes arguments against social contract theory (from Hobbes to Rousseau) and favors an organic society.

Etsi Nos (Feb. 15, 1882) contains some discussion on some central ideas of utilitarian economic thinking and states that in the view of economists, «the regulation of life merely depends upon the good pleasure and free will of man. In society, the liberty without limit which they preach and pursue engenders license, and this license is very soon followed by the overthrow of order, the most fatal scourge of the public welfare» (Leo XIII, 1882: §8). This, however, is not only referable to liberalism but to a wide variety of modern theories. In *Humanum Genus* (April 20, 1884), the pope goes back to the problem of Masonry and the wrong idea of liberty of the adherents to that society.

Immortale Dei discusses directly the *Christian Constitution of States* (Nov. 1, 1885) It presents the first discussion of liberty: «Liberty is a power perfecting man, and hence should have truth and goodness for its object. However, the character of goodness and truth cannot be changed at option. These remain ever one and the same, and are no less unchangeable than nature itself. ... Whatever, therefore, is opposed to virtue and truth may not rightly be brought temptingly before the eye of man, much less sanctioned by the favor and protection of the law» (Leo XIII, 1885: §32). In fact, «the Church cannot approve of that liberty which begets a contempt of the most sacred laws of God, and casts off the obedience due to lawful authority, for this is not liberty so much as license, and is most correctly styled by St. Augustine the *liberty of self-ruin*... Indeed, since it is opposed to reason, it is a true slavery» (Leo XIII, 1885: §37). The true liberty does not allow men to be the slaves of error and of passion, and we should care that «liberty of action shall not transgress the bounds marked out

¹⁷ *Ubi Nos* (May 15, 1871) is about the annexation of Rome to Italy, but raised no specific comment on liberal theory or practice. The explicit change of perspective happened with the II Vatican council and was stated in *Gaudium et Spes*.

¹⁸ Rosmini was attacked mainly for his too close support of Piedmont's policies rather than for his liberal ideas.

by nature and the law of God» (Leo XIII, 1885: §46). Therefore, moral liberty is wrong. However, the fundamental examination of the notion of liberty was proposed in more detail three years later in *Libertas* (June 20, 1888) (discussed in the next section).

Rerum Novarum (May 15, 1891) is more directly addressed to political economy and represents a critique of revolutionary changes, which are all the same accepted in their direction, even if they require institutions to preserve justice in economic relationships. It is a critique of actual economic systems and not of theories, but it adopts the economic categories of capital and labor. However, it never uses the term 'liberalism'. It argues in favor of institutions that liberals tended to avoid (trade unions, associations, etc.), but it has a pragmatic approach. Remarkably, Leo XIII in this letter adopts a very liberal (Lockean) conception of property rights that compensates for the introduction of the demand for social justice in favor of labor (Waterman, 1982; 2016; Solari, 2020). This fact also highlights the reluctance of the pope to let rights as property depend on the state's law. Leo's remaining works, *Dall'Alto dell'Apostolico Seggio* (Oct. 15, 1890), *Custodi di Quella Fede*, and *Inimica Vis* (both Dec. 8, 1892), are, again, against Masonry. Lastly, *Graves de Communi Re* (Jan. 18, 1901) is about Christian democracy (influenced by the research of Giuseppe Toniolo), which is a final acceptance of modern democracy but conceived in a way still far from liberal constitutionalism. In a way, the pope had to cope with the actual situation and begin to open toward a bottom-up, reorganized political action of Catholics within the state.

Pius X represents a step back to what concerns the opening to modernism. *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* (July 3, 1907) is a letter on the role of the Church and theology.¹⁹ *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (Sept. 8, 1907) expresses a further condemnation of modernism, but it is mainly directed at strictly theological issues.²⁰

In the Encyclicals of Pius XI, we find many arguments in favor of a *third way*, which was mainly theorized and popularized by German-speaking Jesuits and by Giuseppe Toniolo in Italy. *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931) points to liberalism as a theory that imbued past government action (10), even though the pope admitted that this doctrine is heterogeneous. It argues that we can receive «no help from either Liberalism or Socialism, for the one had proved that it was utterly unable to solve the social problem aright, and the other, proposing a remedy far worse than the evil itself, would have plunged human society into great dangers» (Pius XI, 1931: §14). It insisted that «the principles of Liberalism were tottering, which had long prevented effective action by those governing the State» (Pius XI, 1931: §27). Importantly, it emphatically stated that «let all remember that Liberalism is the father of this Socialism that is pervading morality and culture and that Bolshevism will be its heir» (Pius XI, 1931: §122). Pius XI also wrote a letter on the 1929 crisis: *Nova Impendet* (Oct. 2, 1931). However, asking for charity, donation, and solidarity, this letter was not an occasion for blaming liberalism. *Divini Redemptoris* (March 19, 1937) is written against Bolshevique communism. It contains some insight into the distribution of income that expresses principles far from liberal ideas: «workingmen are denied a salary that will enable them to secure proper sustenance for themselves and for their families...» (Pius XI, 1937: §52) (the Italian version sounds more finalistic). The sense is that if capitalists do not assure the viable remuneration of the working class, communism could be a serious menace.

After the end of the war, Pius XII wrote *Humani Generis* (Aug. 22, 1950), which is an important epistemological and philosophical document against false philosophy, such as

¹⁹ In Section (5), it contests the assertion that «since the deposit of Faith contains only revealed truths, the Church has no right to pass judgment on the assertions of the human sciences» (Pius X, 1907: §5).

²⁰ But it is not enough for the Modernist school that the State should be separated from the Church. «For as faith is to be subordinated to science, as far as *phenomenal elements* are concerned, so too in temporal matters the Church must be subject to the State» (Pius X, 1907: §25), «It is this inevitable consequence which impels many among liberal Protestants to reject all external worship, nay, all external religious community, and makes them advocate what they call, *individual religion*» (Pius X, 1907: §25).

evolutionism, existentialism, and some kind of historicism, but contains nothing specifically relating to liberalism. Finally, John XXIII, in his *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), expressed some further argument against the naturalistic conception of reality that denies any connection between morals and the economy, which after all is not in opposition to old liberalism. It also criticizes *unbounded competition* and other practical precepts of unregulated capitalism, but liberalism is never cited. It nevertheless argues, in opposition to most liberalism, that *labor is no commodity* and that the state cannot be absent from the economy. He also pointed out the dangers of the *international imperialism of money* and the capture of public powers by organized interests. Similarly to *Rerum Novarum*, he argued in favor of the development of new institutions that are able to regulate the new capitalistic context.

John XXIII's critique of liberalism is explicitly presented in *Octogesima Adveniens* (May 15, 1961). The pope writes that «the Christian who wishes to live his faith in a political activity which he thinks of as service cannot without contradicting himself adhere to ideological systems which radically or substantially go against his faith and his concept of man. ... nor can he adhere to the liberal ideology which believes it exalts individual freedom by withdrawing it from every limitation, by stimulating it through exclusive seeking of interest and power, and by considering social solidarities as more or less automatic consequences of individual initiatives, not as an aim and a major criterion of the value of the social organization» (John XXIII, 1961: §23). Therefore, the idea of freedom remains central to the critique of liberalism, as it misrepresents the foundational role of solidarity in human action. He affirms that Christian should not forget 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» (John XXIII, 1961: §35). This is the clearest position of the Church on liberalism in the XX century, going straight to the point raised in this writing.

Looking at this unfolding of the Roman Church's position on liberalism, we may distinguish the critical position on the French Enlightenment based on the wrong idea of individual autonomy, which has been constant in the last three centuries. Then, in the eighteenth century, as a consequence of the French Revolution and the various changes in political regimes, the main problem was the loss of the organic nature of the polity in favor of constitutional liberalism, plus cultural secularization. However, by the end of the century, that turned to be a lost battle, and then the Vatican reorganized to find new ways of dealing with the new regimes, particularly after the fall of the Austrian empire. The protagonist of the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries was *unregulated capitalism*. Nonetheless, the central epistemological tenets of liberalism, individual (moral) autonomy, remain at odds with Catholicism.

4. Opposing liberty to freedom

The difference between the notions of *liberty* and *freedom* (in part introduced by Benjamin Constant, 1819) is a useful theoretical point for highlighting the diversity between Catholicism and liberalism. The former term tends to point out an individual autonomy that is legally and morally constrained, while the latter is often intended as *independence* from any bound. Freedom as a concept individually centered and abstracted from the moral and legal context makes no sense from the Catholic perspective (De Ruggiero, 1925: 425). Moral freedom has also been condemned in the encyclical letters, being in contrast to any religion as a whole.

Liberty, however, is the concept that allows for a comparison between liberal and Catholic thinking. Taparelli wrote some articles in *Civiltà Cattolica* (1860) on the legally-based liberty,²¹ which is defined *public liberty*. The latter, he stated, assures the respect of all rights of individuals taking place to social interaction. Consequently, the correct concept of liberty is that assuring the respect of individual moral, social and legal rights. This means that the study

²¹ See Mastromatteo and Solari (2014).

of economic interaction cannot elude a legal analysis of individuals' position in the social system (Taparelli, 1860: 41). This element allows for a connection to Locke's classic liberalism and has many similarities to the *liberty of the ancients* introduced by Benjamin Constant.

By the beginning of the Nineteenth century, the contribution of Benjamin Constant helped to point out a relevant difference between the liberties *of the ancient* and *of the moderns*. Although this distinction was first expressed by Sismondi (1818), Constant (1819) captured the two liberalisms well (Galaston, 1991; 1995; 2002). Modern liberty includes the emancipation of the market from political institutions. In modern theories the political order is conceived as a contractual construction and not a natural order (Audard, 2009: chap. 2). The freedom of the moderns is directly opposed to the priority of political or religious authority in the structuring of society.

By contrast, the liberty of the ancients requires individuals' participation in an continuous process of political construction in a bottom-up perspective. It is based on horizontal sociability driven by an interaction able to discover the right rules to its ends. The latter is close to the view of Locke and Burke's conservative liberalism as well as to federalist liberalism.

The original theorization of Locke was based on: 1) the idea of individual consent to government; 2) the idea of self-ownership or self-mastery; and 3) the existence of natural rights within a system of natural law thinking (Tierney, 2005). The second point may contain some problematic concept relatively to liberty, depending on how we conceive it, but it is mainly the "natural law-natural rights" connection that poses some difficult issue. In fact, compared to the ancient tradition of natural law, which was in progress (Tierney, 1997), it represents a change in perspective. Natural law is seen as producing some natural rights (Locke, 1676),²² the latter being interpreted as a global sphere of personality in continuity with laws. This allows Locke's theorization to change focus from laws to rights (Zuckert, 1997). However, such a focus produces a non-neutral change, as it tends to make rights absolute, whereas they depend on the interpretation of laws, institutions, and relationships. In this change, liberty tends to expand when we neglect or abstract it from the source of rights. This, however, happened after Locke and not much in Lockes' approach (Tierney, 2006), which maintains some strong moral dimension. We may say that in Locke's approach, as for the Church, there is a continuum between moral principles and the law. From the Catholic view, politically established civil laws had to be in harmony with moral law.

This reference to the moral dimension remains evident in virtue-based liberalism. In fact, Smith exalted the *happy mediocrity* of bourgeois virtues as a fundamental element of capitalism: prudence, alertness, temperance, justice, self-control, and benevolence.²³ These virtues played a fundamental regulating role in economic processes. Such morally shaped foundations of behavior were progressively lost with utilitarianism and other positivistic definitions of economic agency.

One of the central points of classical liberalism is the *neutrality of institutions* relative to the good life. This was a Lockean legacy that became a fundamental concept in the US Constitution.²⁴ Contrary to the hopes of the Vatican, consent had to be strictly political and not violate the inalienable rights of the individual conscience. This led to confining faith in the private sphere. This is certainly a problematic aspect of liberalism that has been discussed in encyclical letters on 'indifferentism' and on the danger that Catholicism would be transformed along the lines of Protestantism if the ideas of liberals would have prevailed. In the Christian view, *order*—the set of laws regulating civil and economic life—is a progressive result of providence. In liberalism, it is the result of fortuitous casualty induced by the prudential manipulation of circumstances. Burke and the federalist tradition conceived of this ordering as spontaneous and shaped by morals. In modern liberalism, this aspect has been lost.

²² See also Finnis (1980).

²³ In contrast with ancient virtues as "sense of sacrifice," "honour," "self-denial to the public".

²⁴ See Casalini (2002).

The status of Catholic liberty was officially defined in *Libertas* by Leo XIII (June 20, 1888). This letter was written as an academic essay on liberty. It starts with a position close to liberalism:

«Liberty, the highest of natural endowments, being the portion only of intellectual or rational natures, confers on man this dignity - that he is 'in the hand of his counsel' and has power over his actions. ... Man, indeed, is free to obey his reason, to seek moral good, and to strive unswervingly after his last end. Yet he is free also to turn aside to all other things; and, in pursuing the empty semblance of good, to disturb rightful order and to fall headlong into the destruction which he has voluntarily chosen» (Leo XIII, 1888: §1).

In this sentence Leo XIII expressed ideas close to classical liberalism, the idea of a legally shaped and morally bounded liberty. This means that the Church is in favor of human liberty. Nonetheless, people often misunderstood what liberty is. In this way, «either they pervert the very idea of freedom, or they extend it at their pleasure to many things in respect of which man cannot rightly be regarded as free» (Leo XIII, 1888: §1). In this way, the pope talks about *natural liberties* adopting the language of liberals. Natural liberties are differently shaped compared to *moral liberty* derived from classical reason. We define goods as anything that can be the object of our desires. It follows that «freedom of choice is a property of the will, or, rather, is identical with the will in so far as it has in its action the faculty of choice. But the will cannot proceed to act until it is enlightened by the knowledge possessed by the intellect» (Leo XIII, 1888: §5). The good in the Catholic perspective is defined in conformity with classical reason as in medieval thought. Reason is far from being perfect and therefore human liberty necessarily stands in «need of light and strength to direct its actions to good and to restrain them from evil» (Leo XIII, 1888: §7). This *ordering of reason* is what Catholics define as the *moral law*. This implies that individual free will is relatively weakened in favor of the moral necessity socially defined. This is also the Neo-Thomistic view of *natural law* adopted by Leo XIII, which is naturally carved in the mind of man: the reason asking us to do the good. Moreover, moral principles are universal and the Church supplies an interpretation of their application which leaves little autonomy to the individual in this regard. Such a limitation in individual freedom does not totally clash with economics, where ends are given and the focus is on means. The problem is with the absolute autonomy of individual preferences.

Leo XIII particularly criticized liberalism for incorporating principles of naturalism and rationalism in the field of morality and politics. Rationalism is the creed of the supremacy of the independent human reason, refusing submission to faith or other authorities. Consequently, reason is seen as the only judge of truth. Therefore, the issue of the definition of liberty is nothing else than the problem of an independent morality.

It is interesting to note that the pope admitted that an ethical liberalism exists, probably referring to Rosmini or to the French school of *Angers* (also called Catholic "school of liberty").

«There are, indeed, some adherents of liberalism who do not subscribe to these opinions ... compelled by the force of truth, do not hesitate to admit that such liberty is vicious, nay, is simple license, whenever intemperate in its claims, to the neglect of truth and justice; and therefore they would have liberty ruled and directed by right reason, and consequently subject to the natural law and to the divine eternal law. But here they think they may stop, holding that man as a free being is bound by no law of God except such as He makes known to us through our natural reason. In this they are plainly inconsistent» (Leo XIII, 1888: §17).

Therefore, the pope reaffirmed that ethical liberalism should not exalt individualism, otherwise it would not be so different from the liberalism of the moderns.

The pope demands a limitation for what concerns some fundamental liberal freedoms concerning the press and speech. There could be no such right if not used moderately and within the bounds of morality. However, also *liberty of conscience* is problematic: «If by this is meant that everyone may, as he chooses, worship God or not, it is sufficiently refuted by the

arguments already adduced. But it may also be taken to mean that every man in the State may follow the will of God and, from a consciousness of duty and free from every obstacle, obey His commands» (Leo XIII, 1888: §30).

All this explains the completely illiberal part of *Libertas*: the refusal of the sovereignty of people (§16), the denial of 'so-called' liberties of religion (§19), worries about freedom of speech and the press (§23), teaching (§24), and conscience (§30). All these liberties would have endangered the right ordering of reason operated by the Church; it would have lost control of the moral–political public space, leading to the individualization of conscience.

5. Individualism, good and bad?

Individualism is apparently a crucial aspect that hinders the pope from recognizing some affinity with classical liberalism. Locke's individualism is based on a juridical and evolutionary approach to the individual that is not totally incompatible with Neo-Thomism (which, through Late-Scholasticism, incorporated some individualistic concepts). According to Locke (1690), the individual has his/her rooting and his/her belonging; it is not isolated. In particular, the self-conscience defined by Locke is a relationship with others' feedback on the self (Audard, 2009). This is not in conflict with the idea of a person, even if it is not exactly a communitarian conception.

By contrast, Hobbes developed a methodological individualism that is really at odds with Catholic thought. Actually, Michael Freeden (1996) argued that methodological individualism cannot well represent the moral individualism of classic liberalism up to John Stuart Mill.

Later, the *philosophy of moral sense* of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Smith shifted individuality from reason to sentiment. This is also not harshly conflicting with Catholic anthropology, but it is less close to it, similarly to Protestantism. However, Hume affirmed that the individual is not naturally gifted with a moral sense but that he has a natural sympathy for the others. Sympathy is the precondition for moral sentiments derived from it. Actually, this is in opposition to Catholic anthropology.

For Tocqueville, there are two forms of individualism: a low quality and an honorable one, able to foresee the common good and induce people to associate to reach it. For communitarians, individuals also have to identify themselves with the common good. This idea is certainly superficially similar to that of Thomas Aquinas but much simplified and avulse from the complex interplay of moral norms and individual reason.

Consequently, we can distinguish Hobbes' atomistic and methodological individualism from moral individualism. The latter, however, is diversified, and only a few streams of it can be approached in Catholic anthropology. William Galston (1995) proposed a similar distinction based on: a) the pluralistic individualism of Protestant reformation and the 'liberalism of fear' (Locke and Montesquieu) and b) the monistic individualism of Enlightenment, including Hobbes.²⁵

John Stuart Mill studied the free development of individuality as a fundamental principle of well-being. He also (inconsistently) developed a dynamic and relational vision of individuality. However, other parts of his work remain anchored to utilitarianism. Utilitarianism neglects the social nature of individual interests, which is, in any case, a problem for the whole of liberalism.

7. Conclusion: Catholic religion and liberalism at odds?

Catholicism is, without any doubt, at odds with Hobbesian thought and utilitarianism for fundamental epistemological reasons. It apparently displays some methodological affinities

²⁵ Audard (2009) also proposed George Kateb distinction (valid in the US): 1. negative individualism, will of resisting to interferences of others, state...; 2. positive individualism, autonomy and creation dependent on others (Mill); 3. open individualism, to the others and the different.

with the empiricist non-rationalistic tradition of Locke and Burke, which is nonetheless almost extinct today or has undergone an evolution that makes it less open to Catholicism. In any case, moving the Catholic view in the direction of Locke means shifting it into the epistemology of Protestantism. However, this is exactly what happened to Catholicism when it lost the monopoly in the public sphere that allowed the control of consciences (the historicist immanentist dimension cited by Croce): it had to come to terms with the individualization of consciences, and *ethical liberalism* was the second best choice on which to base the understanding of social and economic action. Obviously, in this change, many Catholics turned to socialism as an alternative destination, but that is another story.

Popes of the nineteenth century were aware that liberalism was heterogeneous and that it could include some ethical dimension not totally at odds with Catholicism. Therefore, Catholic documents from 1800–1960 often expressed resentful condemnation of specific and concrete expressions of liberalism, seldom of liberalism as a whole. The specific target of criticism was, instead, the French Enlightenment and modernist philosophy. A few documents expressed detailed theoretical points discussing liberal tenets (*Libertas*, *Rerum Novarum*, and *Quadragesimo Anno*). Popes defended the communitarianism of their religion and the centrality of the Vatican hierarchy in the control of the social definition of the good. Therefore, they often attacked indifferentism and masonry, which directly expressed a concrete political menace for the Church. Most of the conflicting points pertain to the political and social domains and to concrete reforms that endangered the monopolistic position of this institution.

Papal documents made some clear point against individualism that is still fundamental for any attempt to recover some syncretic matching of liberalism and the Catholic religion. To obtain such a mix, we should adopt a very relative form of liberty, obtainable only in very closed communities, or define a liberalism open to the reception of moral obligations defined in a community (ethical or social liberalism). The pretense of producing Catholic liberalism based on strong enforcement of ideas as unlimited individual accumulation and an individualistic form of moral freedom would automatically push it toward something else.

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