BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES

Seventh Essay: The Family as the Training Ground of Citizenship

By Professor Michael Pakaluk

The Two Natural Forms of Community

It seems correct that the two, and the only two, natural forms of human association are the family and political society. If this is so, then we should expect that there is a connection between them, namely, that the family provides the best, and perhaps an indispensable, preparation for good participation in political society; and that the family in turn thrives best when it conceives of itself as orientated toward service of others. And if this is so, then, political society has a special interest, founded in its own self-interest, to preserve and promote the family, whereas the family has an interest in aiming at the good of society beyond itself. Such is the view that will be defended in this and the following essay.

Let us define terms. By an ‘association’ I mean the coordinated action of two or more persons, involving reciprocity, so that each can succeed in achieving, or achieve more

easily, some good. That this good be achieved by all in accordance with some fair plan of coordinated action is the ‘common good’ of that association. For instance, a chess club is an association for the promotion of chess. Each member is fond of playing chess and wants to improve his own playing and promote the game among others. He can do that on his own, to be sure, through study and by playing against computers, but he can do so more easily and effectively by joining with others who have similar interests. Thus, the chess club organizes tournaments in which he can play, publishes magazines to which he can contribute, and so on. That opportunities to play in tournaments, procure issues of magazines, and so on, are distributed fairly among all members of the chess club, is the common good of the club.

By a ‘natural association’ I mean one in which explicit compact, if it exists, serves to make public and ratify some basis of association which existed previously, where this basis of association is related to universal and continuing human needs and goods. A natural association occurs across different cultures and times. Since it is not constituted but only ratified by compact, it has a character which has to be discovered and honored rather than created; it cannot be arbitrarily or indefinitely manipulated, without bad consequences—just as other natural structures, such as the human body or ecological systems, have to be respected and cannot be manipulated arbitrarily without repercussions.

The family in the first instance is in the association of man and woman to set up a household together and beget and raise offspring. Strictly, the family is a composite of three associations: that of husband and wife; that of the children toward one another; and that of husband and wife in relation to the children. The first of these alone is ratified by compact, the marriage contract, which makes explicit and public the aim inherent in true romantic love, of wanting to bind oneself unconditionally and forever to the object of one's love.

The Family

The family is clearly a natural association, as defined. We say that it is composed 'in the first instance' as described, because we must consider and define the family, as indeed we do with any other moral reality, in accordance with 'ideal type' or 'central case' analysis. The family of course suffers many difficulties and perturbations: parents die; they find that they are infertile; relatives or friends additionally live in the same household; there can be serious disagreements that rend or destroy it. But all of these cases are illuminated, and we can succeed in comprehending them, and dealing correctly with them, only if we take them to be derivative cases, related to some central and ideal form. Every moral reality has the task of 'becoming what it is'. Similarly, the family, and what it is, or what it 'wishes to be', is given by the central case.

Note that ‘central case’ analysis allows for perturbations and derivative cases, without, however, allowing that anything that resembles family counts as a family. Resemblance is not the same as relation to the central case—any more than a family portrayed on a television show is a family, because it looks very much like a family. Thus, two men living together who adopt children are not a family, although in some respects they may look like one. The reason is that their living arrangement is not understandable as a declension from the ideal case of a family. In contrast, an elderly man and woman who get married and cannot have children are understandable as a declension from the ideal case: they differ from the ideal case only by the accident that their capacity to have children together is no longer effective.

Political Society

Political society is also a natural association; it arises in all places and times and is only ratified or completed but not constituted by compact. It seems that no other association is similarly ‘natural’: perhaps the market is so, but the market, given its dependence on a system of money and a background of peace, is best seen as an aspect of political society.

To say that political society is natural is not to say that the form that it takes is universally the same: it can take the form or a city-state; a nation-state; or even an empire. The Federalist system of the United States is a kind of combination of such forms. In its original

conception, the particular states were not unlike the Greek polis, whereas the Federal government was evidently a nation.

What all political societies have in common is the way in which citizens conceive of one another and their common good. The common good of political society is the complete welfare of every individual, achieved fairly. That it be achieved fairly corresponds to our notion of human rights: it should not be the case, for instance, that one person's complete welfare is advanced at the cost of someone else's, without free consent on his part and some sort of eventual reciprocation. What is taken to be the complete welfare of an individual varies across political societies. In the ancient Greek *polis*, for instance, it was thought that the legislators should have a very definite conception of what a good human being and good human life were, and that the laws should aim to promote this as much as possible, not holding back from extensive coercion and social control, if that were necessary and efficient. We in contrast place a great value on freedom, correctly so, and therefore tend to think of political society as providing, most directly, something like the material conditions of a good life: it then becomes the free project of citizens to make good use of those conditions.

The way in which members of political society relate to one another and regard one another is as 'free and equal' (this is claimed by political philosophers as various as Aristotle and Rawls) and therefore as governed by the rule of law, and by all of those devices of the rule of law, that have been discovered and refined through actual practice.

Perhaps the best way to grasp this kind of relation is by thinking of times in which it should to some degree be present but in fact is absent. We all know of cases in which a club, school, or organization fails, because its founders continue to think of it as something like an extension of their own personality or family life. The founders, we say, ‘never ran the thing professionally’; they paid no attention to ‘due process’; they were unable to place themselves on a level with everyone else involved in running the association. Now think of how the founders should have acted in these cases, and make a kind of extrapolation to an ideal, and that is the way in which we should relate generally to other citizens in political society. In political society, we relate to others in such a way that we acknowledge that we are distinct persons; that each of us is one among many equal citizens; and that each has a kind of responsibility and freedom in contributing to the common good of that society.

It should not be supposed that political society so described is necessarily governed in the manner of a democracy. Clearly, it need not be, and our own form of government proves the point. The United States Constitution was intended to combine, into a single government, elements of kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. The President is analogous to a king, insofar as he is a single ruler over many; the Senate was intended to be a kind of ‘natural aristocracy’, with each State having an equal voice, on the grounds that each, as a State, has an equal expertise or knowledge; and the House of Representatives was meant to me more like a pure democracy, where sheer numbers count. In the actions of all three of these institutions, and in the affairs of citizens as

ordered under each of these three, it is possible for citizens to relate to one another in the manner of political society, as free and equal persons under law.

The Family as a School of Political Society

Aristotle was the first political theorist to speculate on the connection between the natural association of the family and that of political society. He was impressed that there are three types of political society, depending upon their form of authority—kingship, aristocracy, and democracy—and that, as it happens, there are three basic relationships of authority in the family as well, corresponding to these. Fatherhood is like kingship; the relationship of husband and wife to each other, especially in their shared relationship to the children, is akin to an aristocracy; and the association of siblings resembles democracy. For Aristotle, this proved that the family was intended to be a kind of seedbed of the various motives, sentiments, and affections, that were necessary to sustain any form of political society. Whatever form of constitution a person lived in, if he had been raised in a family, he would find there, in his upbringing, the materials he needed to carry out well his role in political society.

That we need motives, sentiments, and affections of the right sort, in playing our role in political society, is the doctrine of civic friendship. Aristotle was concerned particularly with how a concern for justice, laudable as that is, is yet insufficient in our dealings with others.

“People who have the virtue of justice still need friendship; however, when people are friends,” Aristotle observed, “they have no need of justice besides.”

The Need for Civic Friendship

There are three important reasons why justice alone is insufficient in our dealings with others. First, a concern for justice alone cannot insure the unity of an association, which has to be underwritten by a shared love of a common good. This is evident from the way in which we deploy our notions of rights. A slave-state partisan in the United States in 1850 might have had a perfectly well-developed sense of justice and human rights, but he would have no esteem for a black man as a fellow of his and equal. His notion of justice was in order: he simply didn’t apply it to all human beings. This was a deficiency of esteem, not of justice. (By this I do not mean to imply that he would be wholly responsible for this deficiency, that the society in which he was raised had no role to play. Clearly, this sort of defect is self-perpetuating: the structures it tolerates are the structures that foster it in turn. Clearly, too, the scope of our esteem is affected by the doctrines we accept. Someone who accepts the doctrine that all human beings are equal, regardless of race, would in accepting this have started out on the path of having the right sort of fellow-feeling for a black man as well as a white man.) *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was important in fueling the abolitionist movement precisely because it inspired a love which then put notions of justice into practice: that is why the South derided the novel for its ‘sentimentality’.

Second, mere justice is by the nature of the case is self-centered, because its enlivening emotion is anger, which, as a response to perceived injury, is defensive. All of us become very alive to the demands of justice especially when we ourselves are injured. We regard it as a kind of obligation for a ‘victim’ or someone who is ‘oppressed’ to come forward and press his complaint. We zealously take on a cause of justice in defense of another only after we have somehow taken an attack on that other person to be an attack on ourselves. Zeal for justice is fostered by brooding on injuries. It aims to get the other fellow to see your point of view, never to get yourself to see his. It is unyielding, in fact, and takes any compromise as a kind of annihilation of self. Note that all of these traits of justice are good, if kept in their proper place; but if they grow without restriction and are fostered without any goal or point, then they become destructive and divisive. A society animated solely by a zeal for justice, given that inevitably we harm one another when we live together, will soon enough deteriorate into blood feuds and civil war.

Third, justice on its own is unfriendly, not simply because it cannot tolerate common ground and compromise, as was said, but also because it is inflexible. As it nurses its anger and its grudges, justice all the while formulates principles and laws, which articulate its case. Its accusations and approaches take the form of a law: “You shouldn’t do X.” “One must never bring about Y in case of Z.” Now laws and generalizations are perfectly serviceable and necessary, in identifying those harms without which people cannot associate. “You should not kill.” “You should not steal.” These and other generalizations are simply basic preconditions of associating with others. But such laws are of little help in associating with others constructively, once the basic conditions of association have

already been met. Supposing that we are not killing each other or stealing (rudimentary conditions, both), then how do we deal with each other?

In fact, human association of the constructive sort is necessarily open-ended, because of the many, unpredictable variations in our dealings with one another. On account of this, as economists say, all contracts and rules are necessarily ‘incomplete’—no matter how carefully written, a contract will not be able to take into account all contingencies. You contract to provide a service on a certain date in exchange for payment in advance, but then your delivery vehicle is destroyed by a freak fire. What then? But all contracts are similarly open-ended.

The same point applies to laws. As Aristotle remarked, a lawgiver can formulate a law only in terms of relatively gross generalities, and the intelligent application of a law, therefore, will require that we grasp and apply the intention of the lawgiver. To this capacity Aristotle gave the name of ‘equitability’. This attitude is absolutely essential for social life. We informally refer to it as ‘cutting the other guy some slack’ or ‘walking in his shoes’. To give a plain example: when you are in a rush to get to work, the car in front of you is moving very slowly and keeps stopping momentarily without signaling. If justice alone motivates you, then you think only about the inconvenience to yourself, and the obnoxiousness of such poor driving, and in response you begin perhaps to lean on your horn or shout. But the virtue of equity would have you temper this reaction by thinking about the other fellow’s point of view: you consider that he’s likely lost or following directions (that’s why he’s slowing down at the cross streets); that you yourself have been

in his situation before and understand what that's like; and that it's really a very minor nuisance that you are slowed down while he is finding the address he is looking for.

If it's only justice that moves us, we become surly, angry, irritable, and self-centered—all the while justifying ourselves with the rhetoric of 'rights talk'. Justice, then, needs to be tempered and directed by a genuine affection for others, and a grasp of their good, precisely as fellow citizens. Aristotle called such affection, as we said, 'civic friendship', and he argued that we learn it in the family. Each of the aforementioned structures in the family has its own characteristic affections, and, if we've been raised correctly, in a sound family, we can easily transfer and adapt such affections, through a kind of analogical reasoning, to our fellow citizens in our dealings with them. For instance, to treat fellow citizens well, insofar as we relate to one another under democratic structures, is to have towards them affections no unlike those that siblings have toward one another in a family. (That is why Aristotle criticized so severely the communism that Plato proposed, which implied the destruction of the family. Plato, he said, by abolishing the family, hoped to make it so that all citizens treated one another 'as brothers'. But it is quite impossible, Aristotle argued, that they could know what it was to treat one another 'as brothers', if real brotherhood has been abolished.)

Civic Friendship is Taught in the Family

This is a rudimentary way in which citizenship finds its origin in the family: the affections necessary for civic friendship, itself needed for peaceable social life, are inculcated

naturally within the family. But even more can be said, because there are other attitudes and outlooks, essential to good citizenship, which likewise are fostered easily and best in a sound family. For instance, it is essential to being a good citizen that one be able to recognize the limits of government authority; that one have a lively sense of the importance of ‘subsidiarity’; that one be able to draw a distinction between wants and needs; that one have a good sense of the combination, inherent in our human nature, of an innate goodness together with some kind of tendency to corruption. And in the next and final essay, we shall look more carefully at how the family teaches us to be good citizens, through having the right outlook as regards these, and thus how any weakening of the family likewise must lead to a weakening, over the long run, of political society.

North American Educational Initiatives Foundation, Inc.

www.naeif.org