

## **BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES**

### **Eighth Essay: The Family as the Wellspring of a Healthy Society**

By Professor Michael Pakaluk

In the last essay, we reviewed Aristotle's brilliant argument that the two natural forms of association—the family and political society—depend upon each other, as one might expect, if indeed they are by nature. Aristotle's argument is based on an understanding of the 'virtues'. Virtues may be regarded as powers or active dispositions, which enable us to act effectively for goods; those who lack the relevant virtues, simply are unable to achieve the same sorts of things as those who have them. It then becomes an important question: which powers or active dispositions must citizens in general possess, if they are to associate successfully in political society?

One such power is the virtue of justice. Regard this as a refined sense of equality (or fairness), together with feelings of anger and retribution, which follow upon the perception that you yourself, or someone you identify with, has been treated unequally (unfairly). Now imagine a society in which citizens are equipped only with justice and modulate their dealings with one another only through this power. Such a society could hardly survive: as we saw previously, insofar as someone acts solely out of justice, he nurses anger; concentrates primarily upon himself; and becomes inflexible and harsh in his making use

of the law. A society in which justice alone were the chief and animating virtue would quickly become divided and break apart, dissolving amidst strife and civil war—or, if not this, at best it would be only superficially at peace, with its citizens secretly being resentful of one another, lacking affection, and looking for occasions to get an upper hand. One might say, curiously, that although justice is the chief virtue of human associations, it is not self-sufficient as a virtue. Justice on its own implies frequent injustice.

So, some other virtue is required, to compensate for the deficiencies of justice—some virtue that involves positively seeking the good, in contrast with justice, which is a ‘negative’ virtue, concerned primarily with avoiding or correcting for the bad. Aristotle’s claim is that association in political society needs to be animated by a sincere, stable, and general concern for others, and for the common good for which they are cooperating. We said that this attitude might be called ‘civic friendship’, and we saw that it took a variety of forms, depending upon the basic constitutional structure of one’s political society. Now Aristotle’s key point is that civic friendship, thus understood, is taught and nourished within the family. The family is its origin and model. Thus, the family provides that outlook and those virtues which political society needs in order to flourish. The natural institutions of the family and political society are thus adapted to each other. Political society provides us with a conception of persons relating to one another fairly, as free and equals, by which the family measures and guides itself: this is the ‘skeleton’ of human society, if you will. The family, as the source of civic friendship, provides us with affections and an active concern for the good of all others, which then gives unity and a common purpose to political society, adding ‘flesh’ to the framework set down with a view to fairness and

equality.

Note that, if these things are so, then just as education and upbringing within the family should be carried out with a view to the active citizenship that the members of the family will display, as members of a wider political society, so political society should take, as one of its chief aims, the fostering and safeguarding of the family as a natural institution. The natural dependence of each institution upon the other implies corresponding responsibilities and obligations.

### **Modern Citizenship and Freedom**

Our modern conception of the role of government in political society is refined in comparison with that shared by classical writers; therefore, we require a refined, though related, understanding of the virtues of citizenship. Everything that Aristotle argued as regards civic friendship remains true, but there are other requirements and attitudes of civic friendship, which we must additionally foster. It is not that, for us, less is required of a good citizen now in comparison with then, but rather more.

The contemporary political society in which we live is aptly called a 'liberal democracy': 'liberal' because freedom (*libertas*) is regarded, rightly, as a fundamental good; 'democracy', because government is viewed as self-government, carried out through

rulers who represent the people rather than stand apart from and over them. Now these two notions of freedom and self-government imply corresponding virtues.

Freedom in contemporary society is the result of limited government, but government is limited only because citizens limit it, and their ability and willingness to place limits upon government depends upon their having two fundamental commitments.

First, citizens must be committed to some notion of natural law or natural rights. A natural law, or a natural right, is an obligation and requirement of justice which arises simply because of human nature, and which therefore is antecedent to human decision or agreement. For instance, any human being, simply because he is human, has the natural right to life, that is to say, it is always and, in all circumstances, wrong for anyone to act so as to deprive an innocent human being, who is a non-aggressor, of his life. This is true prior to government; it remains true after any government has been established. Any government that attempted to abridge this right, either by killing innocent human beings, or by allowing their killing, would to that extent be acting without any authority. Its prescriptions and commands should simply not be obeyed, because they would be contravened by a prior authority. But note that this limit on government depends upon citizens' recognizing natural rights and being committed to them, as something prior to government. Such a limitation does not occur automatically or magically; it is actively enforced only if citizens have a corresponding virtue. Call this virtue, "commitment to natural rights".

The second source of freedom, through limited government, is that provided through a commitment to what is known as 'subsidiarity'. Subsidiarity presupposes that society is organized hierarchically, and that political society is a kind of 'society of societies'. It is the principle that a social function should be assigned to the smallest level in this hierarchy, which is able effectively to carry it out, and that a higher-level association should interfere with the function of an association under it, only to correct abuses and never in such a way as to undermine the operation of that lower-level association. Subsidiarity is a safeguard of freedom, because it places constraints on the nature of the control exercised by government. It is an anti-totalitarian principle. Subsidiarity recognizes that political society is for the most part 'civil society', composed of a rich network of groups, clubs, associations, and institutions (including, importantly, the natural institution of the family). Government is merely the highest authority of this rich fabric, a small portion of the whole. Subsidiarity blocks government from 'micro-managing'; and it encourages government to operate through incentives and positive guidance rather than through force and restriction.

(Subsidiarity also promotes the ideal of self-government, insofar as it is a principle which distributes authority as widely as possible throughout a society and maximizes the extent to which important decisions are made by those most nearly affected by them.)

Thus freedom, as advanced through limited government, requires that citizens have the virtues of a commitment to natural rights, and a willingness to order their relations to one

another in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Note that we do not regard rights, principles, or rules as themselves being of ultimate importance for political society. Rather, what is decisive is whether citizens actively and habitually promote these rights and principles for their own sake, and with understanding—but this is the work of virtue.

### **Modern Citizenship and Self-Government**

Self-government, strictly speaking, is the exercise of authority by the citizens of political society over themselves. It is government “of the people, by the people, for the people”. Therefore, from the very nature of the case, it must have exactly those features that are found in proper self-mastery and be subject to the same risks and difficulties.

Now for someone to show self-mastery, it is essential that he have a good knowledge of himself and that his rationality take precedence over his irrational appetites, whims, and impulses. Correspondingly, in self-government, it is essential that the body politic have a good knowledge of itself, and that, in its actions, its reason predominates over irrational impulses.

By ‘self-knowledge’ we mean moral self-knowledge. Most importantly, an individual needs to recognize the mixed character of his own nature—that we are basically good, but that we have tendencies to evil, which, if left unchecked, will eventually expand and subvert our judgment. Similarly, in sound self-government, the body politic must understand that

its intentions and purposes are basically good, but that it has inherent and ineliminable tendencies to evil, which consequently must be guarded against and, if necessary, checked. All self-government that is placed on a good foundation must begin with an awareness of this mixed character of human nature. In theology, this is called the 'effects of original sin' or 'fallen nature'. But political philosophy can view it simply in the way we have described: we have a basically good nature, but also deceptive tendencies to evil, and thus our actions in dealing with ourselves, especially our attempts at self-government, must be carried out with sobriety in view of these facts.

By the 'precedence of rationality over irrationality', we mean such things, of course, as living by principles and by some sort of order; but more fundamentally we mean a life in which a distinction is drawn between true needs and mere wants, and priority is given to needs. An undisciplined and spoiled child draws no such distinction. Whatever he wants, he clamors for as if he needs it. He is incapable of sacrificing things wanted for things needed. He lets his own wants lead him to deprive others of what answers to their needs. Similarly, a body politic will be like a spoiled child, and incapable of self-mastery, unless it can distinguish needs from wants, and order its affairs accordingly by giving priority to the former.

### **Modern Citizenship as Originating in the Family**

So then, to summarize: We have identified four traits—four virtues—which citizens must have, if they are to associate successfully in a liberal democracy, in which freedom and self-government are prized as ideals. Such citizens must have: a stable, habitual, and informed commitment to natural rights and natural law, which they prize for its own sake; a similar commitment to subsidiarity as an ideal of the ordering of society; a sober and active understanding of themselves as basically good but tending to evil; and a persistent favoring of reason over unreason, as shown especially in the distinguishing of needs from wants, and in taking the former as prior to the latter.

If, along with Aristotle, we regard the family as a natural association complementary to political society, then we should expect that these four virtues, so vital to modern political society, would find their origin and sustenance in a well-functioning family. As we said, these traits must be regarded as part of the character of citizens. It is not enough that citizens assent merely intellectually to abstract principles or a code of law; mere knowledge of history or of ‘the Founders intentions’ is also insufficient. What is required, rather, is a sharing of those intentions, a similarity of outlook, and the free adoption of a way of life consistent with the same.

Yet we do see that each of these four traits is best acquired in a well-functioning family.

That there are natural rights and a natural law, prior to human convention or agreement, is learned by children, through their experience of the natural authority that their parents have over them, and especially the authority of the father. This authority is direct and

speaks to the heart. It is prior to other authorities, in the sense that no other person and no government may legitimately contravene the sound directives that a father gives his children. We recognize it, too, as a true authority, in the sense that we are bound to obey our parents, even when we regard their decisions as misguided, and even when their decisions are plainly misguided (so long as such obedience would not imply that we do wrong to anyone else). Yet the authority of parents over their natural children is not conferred upon them by anyone else; it is not the result of human decision or agreement. Rather, it springs directly from the natural relationship that parents have to children as their origin and source. From the experience of this, children learn that there are obligations that we have to one another, simply in virtue of our having the same natural relationship, as all being of the same stock—our shared humanity itself as the basis for human rights. (And this relationship, too, can be traced to a common origin and based upon that. Thomas Jefferson insisted that the phrase “all men are created equal” be included in the United States *Declaration of Independence*, as indicating that all of us are equal, precisely as a consequence of our having a common origin from the same God.)

We saw in an earlier essay how the natural bond between husband and wife—exclusive, complete, and permanent—is intended to be the basis for a new society, even stronger and closer than a bond of blood. It could not but be this way, if each family is meant to be a new society. But, if so, then, from the experience of this, children acquire also a lively sense of subsidiarity. For they see how nature has so disposed of things, that the family carries out best those tasks that serve the common good. And they understand that other authorities outside the family, at best have the authority to correct abuses in the family

but have no real authority to reach within the family and order its affairs. Thus, the priority of the family to the state, as part of the lived experience of a child growing up in such a family, will teach him habits of thought, feeling, and reaction supportive of subsidiarity.

Finally, both of the elements of self-mastery that we have mentioned—moral self-knowledge, and the precedence of reasonability—are taught in the family, but in such a way that they can be generalized for any form of self-government. Of course, all children who are raised well are taught self-mastery. But what is distinctive about a family, is that within a family the task of self-mastery is given a social character. It is the project of the entire family, that each child acquires self-mastery. The family as a whole views each of its members, lovingly, as basically good; but the family as a whole, similarly, regards the actions of its members as needing to be corrected and checked. The point is that this conception of what we are is publicly shared in the family, and the good of each of its members is pursued in light of it. Similarly, in a well-functioning family, the wants of its members are placed second to the needs that they have, individually and corporately—and, once again, this principle of ‘needs over wants’ is publicly acknowledged and becomes part of the character of the children.

No other institution can inculcate these virtues. Consider, for instance, a day care facility. The workers in such a facility have no direct authority over the children: their authority is conferred and contractual; therefore, their relationship to the children under their care could not possibly teach children the reality of natural rights and natural law. Similarly, a day care facility has no natural standing as an institution meant to carry out better

something which a larger-level institution could not carry out. Indeed, it is less adept at raising children than the family, and if anything, it is easy to view a day care facility as the extension of some larger association—it is a service provided by government (or at least funded by the government), or the facility is part of a larger chain or enterprise. Again, a day care facility cannot teach the self-understanding and self-mastery required of citizens, because workers in such a facility do not regard themselves as allowed to make judgments about the moral nature of the actions and character of the children. Such workers regard themselves as aiming to ‘educate’ or ‘manage’, but not to form good character, by starting from a basically good nature affected by tendencies to evil. (In fact, this very way of speaking is alien to the bureaucratic worldview of a day care facility.) Similarly, the distinction between needs and wants implies a ‘moral judgment’ which day care workers would be loath to draw.

We posit that these characteristics of a day care facility, in relation to a family, are necessary and irremediable. They arise from the very nature of the associations themselves. Because the family is a basic and natural institution, it cannot but have a moralistic character and moralistic purposes. Because a day care facility is artificial and derivative, it cannot but limit itself to ‘management of desires’ rather than true moral instruction.

If the above line of reasoning is correct, then there is a direct link between the health of family life in a society, and that society’s long-term prospects for freedom and prosperity. No matter how rich the historical inheritance or how astute the constitutional provisions

of a nation, if its citizens lack the civic virtues that enable them actually to understand and to want to conform to that inheritance and those provisions, then all else will be for naught. Man does not live on abstract principles alone. He needs virtue to put principles into practice. And yet these virtues, as we have seen, are inculcated best or in fact only through families.

It is a common objection to liberal democracy that it does not directly promote those sources and wellsprings that are essential to itself. Liberal democracy requires a people with a religious outlook, yet it cannot directly promote any religion. It requires a moral people, yet it cannot paternalistically promote virtue. Similarly, it requires sound family life, yet it cannot directly cause families to be healthy. Nonetheless, it can use all of the tools of sound liberal statecraft to promote family stability and flourishing. And, at least, it can refrain from attacking the natural institution of the family—which implies that it must, after all, adopt and embrace the correct conception of the family, and insure that the family is correctly defined and promoted in law, as the essential and natural institution that it is. Political liberalism must embrace a sound family policy or consent to its own self-undermining.

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