



WHAT IS A CATHOLIC CITIZEN?

By Colin Miller

The title of this little newspaper is intentionally ambiguous — it's meant to provoke thought and discussion. What is a *Catholic citizen*? Perhaps one of the ways we can begin to think about this question is to look at a few historical examples.

Eusebius of Caesarea (260–339 A.D.) was a bishop and historian in the early fourth century. During his lifetime Christianity had gone from being a small, persecuted minority to an officially sponsored religion of the empire, spurred by the Emperor Constantine's famous conversion to the Faith. After Constantine's death in 337, Eusebius wrote a book called *The Life of Constantine*, portraying him as God's chosen representative for this new phase in history. Now — by means of the Roman empire — Eusebius thought, God would finally bring his kingdom to every corner of the earth. Just like God had driven out the pagan nations in the Old Testament before the people of Israel, so now he would convert the whole world by a combination of preaching and military might.

In Eusebius' mind, then, one becomes a Catholic citizen largely by simply being a citizen. Being a good Christian is close to synonymous with being a good Roman. The accent is firmly on being a *Catholic citizen*.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.) offers a different conception. Towards the end of his life Augustine wrote his famous

work *The City of God* on the occasion of the barbarian sack of Rome. His fellow Romans had blamed the catastrophe on the Christians' refusal to worship the pagan gods. They had accused the Christians, essentially, of being traitors — the worst kind of citizens there could be. Augustine replied that, on the contrary, it was the pagans' immoral lives that were the downfall of Rome. Christians, rather, by their own good morality, were most beneficial to any republic. Rome itself, in fact, he dared to claim, had never even been a true republic, because they had always been so divided against one another. They all loved themselves so much, that there could be no true unity. The Christians, on the other hand, were bound together by the love of God and each other, which made them truly a community in a way that any worldly polity could never be.

For Augustine, then, to be a good citizen, one could not do better than to be fully Christian. Get to Mass, say your prayers, keep morally pure. He emphasizes — in contrast to Eusebius — being a distinctively *Catholic* citizen.

And so here we might see two possible poles. Like Eusebius, one pole emphasizes loyalty to country and its way of life as a big part of what makes one a faithful Christian. The other pole, with Augustine, emphasizes one's Christian identity and practice as constituting the best way to be a

good citizen. Probably each of us can locate ourselves somewhere on the spectrum between these two as how we think about our own Catholic citizenship today. That is itself something to think about and discuss, but there is one more figure worth examining.

In the early third century Origen of Alexandria (180–254 A.D.) wrote a long book against a pagan critic of Christianity named Celsus. Celsus had criticized the Christians for not being good enough citizens and for seemingly taking a marginal place in the governance of the Roman empire. So he urged them to fuller participation in the state, the army, and national life, for the sake of the common good.

Origen's reply is interesting. He doesn't consider the nature of Rome — whether this or that part of it is good or bad — the way that Eusebius and Augustine had. What he says goes in an entirely different direction. He points out that Christians are, first of all, citizens of the Church. He writes that while Celsus urges them to take up the government of the Empire for the sake of having wholesome laws and a good society, Christians have in each city an assembly of the faithful — a local Catholic church — where their primary loyalties will always lie.

This, it seems to me, entirely reframes the question. Origen is not denying that, with Eusebius, it may be the case that

being a citizen of Rome is an important way of being a Christian. Nor is he denying, with Augustine, that it is certainly the case that Christians are the best Roman citizens. He is making a more fundamental point, namely, that as Christians we have an additional citizenship that defines our primary identity.

And this, it seems, is an emphasis we could all learn from today. Being a Catholic citizen surely entails aspects of all three models we've looked at, even if we find ourselves at different points on the spectrum.

Yet Origen is reminding us that who we most basically are has been redefined by our baptism. There, we become citizens of real-life, flesh-and-blood, communities — not just "the Church," but our local churches — whose liturgy, community life, and daily news should be at least as determinative for our lives as any other social or political allegiance. Origen is pointing to the fact that, of course, our first allegiance is to Christ, but that that allegiance takes the social form of being visible, active members of the strange community called Church.+

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CHURCH AS A WAY OF LIFE

By Tyler Hambley

Sometimes, we can get the impression that Catholic social teaching is like a political platform for the Church. So it's about "issues", or activism, lobbying, or how we vote. It's about, in other words, stuff the government does. But while there's certainly some of that, Catholic social teaching is about so much more.

It's about building thick Catholic communities, and asking: do we have much Catholic community today beyond waving to others across the pews, or perhaps "opting in" to the occasional parish program offering? It's about our finances: what do we spend our money on, what do we invest in, and how much should we have? It's about work and labor: what is good work, and are we satisfied with our jobs? It's about the poor — their place in our lives and what Pope Francis calls *encountering* the poor. It's about reconnecting with the land, about agriculture and trades, what we eat and where it comes from. It's about technology, and not only what we do with it, but what it does to us. And, it's about education: how we bring up our kids, and what counts as Catholic education in the first place. It's about all this and more.

Most importantly, Catholic social teaching is about helping us see how these little details of our lives link up with our worship of God in the Mass, integrating our lives with our prayers. Catholic social teaching, in other words, is primarily about what we do; not, in the first instance, about what the government does. It's about making Catholicism a whole way of life, opening ourselves entirely to Christ. Call it, *Church as a way of life*.

Too often, we can get caught thinking of the Church's social teaching as something outside of what we do, something outside of what we are. After

all, it can often seem that, for the most part, the basic structure of our lives is determined by the political and economic arrangements of society. Sure, we may have a myriad of choices within these arrangements — which college to attend, which career path to select, what grocery store to frequent, or whether Starbucks or Caribou fits the bill today — but, overall, our *form of life* is already set in stone.

Even Church — which one we attend and what parts of its practice we take up — can seem like just another one of the "options" we choose within this deeper, preset form. Yet, what the Lord invites us into is a far more comprehensive reimagining of our lives, and that's where things start to get really interesting.

To be sure, we Christians are born into history. We are called to live *in* the world around us. But the possibilities for living in the world — how extensive our choices and options *really* are — depends upon how we see it. And how we see it, of course, depends upon our perspective. And for Catholics, we want our perspective to be determined by the lens of the Church's corporate life together — its prayers, liturgy, sacraments, works of mercy, etc. It is from there that we receive the kind of training necessary, not merely to choose the more Catholic of already settled "options" presented to us, but, rather, to see the

world in a Catholic way in the first place. And so, while we must always be responsive to the political, social, and economic realities around us, *how* we respond to and interpret those realities — the small, daily tactics we employ — can and must be constantly renegotiated by way of "reading" the world around us anew through the lens of our prayers, contemplation of scripture, and, especially, of our being shaped by the Mass.

What might this look like? Imagine, for a moment, a handful of Catholics joining together to eat lunch on Sunday as an extension of their worship of God and their passing the peace. Seems a rather quaint and certainly not uncommon thing to do. But then that group might form new, unforeseen bonds and decide to make gathering for dinner a more regular thing. After some time, they make a point of inviting newcomers they see in the Church to join them. From there, one of these folks suggests gathering during the week for prayer and discussion of the Scriptures for the next Sunday. Interest in one another's lives grows. Trust flourishes. Soon, the hard line between what is "mine" and what is "yours" begins to loosen a bit amidst their convivial bonds. They start to depend on one another for support: perhaps a ride someplace, watching the kids some evening, dropping a meal off, or starting a

garden together. Still later, they even begin to wonder how they might serve the poor in their area. The possibilities, obviously, are endless, but what if there was a movement of Catholics slowly reimagining their lives in light of their being the Church together all across the country? Suddenly, something like the culture wars, political hand-wringing, and the spectrum of "positions" presented to isolated voters would look a little quaint in comparison.

Whatever the case, the point is, there is no single way for a Catholic way of life to emerge, but therein lies the adventurous task we too often overlook. After all, our Lord gave us a Church not merely to operate as a sidecar for the engines of secular agendas, but as the means and ends of His restoring us to what we were truly made for: communion with Himself, one another, and creation. When Church becomes our way of life, we gain the ability to see the world the way that God sees it.+



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IT'S A GOOD TIME TO BE A CHRISTIAN

By Fr. Bryce Evans

In times such as ours, marked as they are by difficulty and danger, confusion and disorientation, it is of vital importance that believers keep in mind one simple truth: *it is a good time to be alive; it is a good time to be a Christian*. This may seem counterintuitive, given the challenges that the Church faces today. Indeed, "crisis" has been a watchword among Christians for many decades now, and this for good reason. The forces of secularization from both within and without the Church have overthrown many former strongholds, leaving believers to feel increasingly isolated and vulnerable in their walk of faith. Nevertheless, we should be clear: it is a good time to be a Christian.

It is a good time to be a Christian, not in spite of the challenges we face but precisely on account of them, because these are times in which it is necessary for the Christian to know the reason for his belief. If he is to remain a Christian, he must know why he is a Christian. It was not always this way. In the not too distant past, it was possible and even common for believers to persevere in the faith for their entire lives without ever needing to confront its foundational rationale, carried along by custom and culture and familial education. Christians could be Christians without ever seriously examining why they were Christians. In our days, this is no longer the case. The supports have been removed. The currents have shifted. Faith confronts a headwind. And under such conditions, it becomes necessary for the believer to clearly know the reason for his belief if he is to believe at all. And while this situation carries significant challenges, it is fundamentally a good situation for the believer, because it is under such conditions that the power of the gospel is revealed. When Christians know the reason

for their belief, crisis becomes an occasion for the revelation of Christ's glory.

When I speak of the "reason for belief," I do not mean just arguments in favor of God or Christianity. Such arguments have a role to play in supporting and preparing the way for faith, but they can never supply its fundamental motive. Faith does not rest on human reasonings. Rather, by the "reason for belief" I mean something more akin to the "reason" why I trust another



person, or the "reason" I acknowledge something as beautiful. Such "reasons" are never reducible to whatever arguments might be amassed in their favor. Finally, the "reason" I trust another person is inseparable from the person himself, and the "reason" I am captivated by something's beauty is inseparable from the beauty itself. They are "arguments" unto themselves, that necessarily convict anyone who sees them rightly.

Similarly, the "reason for our belief" is not ultimately reducible to any number of arguments that might be compiled in its behalf. At the end of the day, the motive of our belief is inseparable from the object in which we believe: namely, Jesus Christ. In his glory, his incomparable beauty, and his redeeming truth and love, he is himself the irrefutable "argument" in favor of our faith, and the "reason" that compels us to believe, who is undeniable once he is properly seen. To know the "reason" for our faith, then, is (at the end of the day) simply to know Jesus Christ in his incomparable love and glory, whose convicting power is inescapable if we open ourselves to it. To know him in this way is to reach the rock bottom foundation of faith's certitude that can withstand any assaults of the age.

The unique privilege of our times, then, lies in the fact that they force us to precisely this foundation and to nothing less. Prior times may have spared a faith that was less well clarified, but in the same stroke they also allowed for a faith that was easily compromised in its diminished awareness of the meaning of its fundamental decision. How common the stories are of believers who have been Christian by measure, who did not reflect the full power of the Gospel in their lives because they did not know who they were, nor what their decision meant. Today's times demand more: they demand an uncompromising clarity regarding the ground of belief, so that its comprehensive decision can take root in our entire existence.

True knowledge of Jesus necessarily entails a comprehensive commitment on the part of believers in which we stake our lives upon him in every dimension, including the social and interpersonal dimension. It is for this reason that knowledge of Christ is inseparable from

the community of the Church. Perhaps one of the places where the power of Gospel is most especially set to erupt in our privileged times is precisely here in the social dimension of the faith. If we allow the foundational decision of faith to unfold here in this communal dimension, allowing it to shape our whole reality as we stake our lives upon the prospect of entrusting ourselves to one another in communities of Christ-like charity, then the power of Christ's love can truly become a new force in the world. What an opportunity! Truly these are good times to be a Christian. Let



Fr. Bryce Evans is the co-director of the Habiger Institute for Leadership at the Center for Catholic Studies and Adjunct Instructor of Theology and Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas. In July of 2021, he was appointed by Archbishop Bernard Hebda as co-pastor of the Church of St. Mary in Lowertown St. Paul.

THE CENTER FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

By Fr. Paul Treacy



Fr. Paul Treacy is the Pastor of the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul.

The Church of the Assumption is excited to launch *The Center for Catholic Social Thought* and offer a new and important ministry of education, research, and conversation. The idea for the Center began with a desire to help others see how our faith can inform and motivate our living of the Gospel. Certainly, Sacred Scripture provides many passages which encourage us to be attentive to the dignity of each human person made in God's image, community and solidarity, the dignity of work and the beauty of all of creation. Also, in Mary's Magnificat and her model, our patroness aligns herself with the lowly, the poor, the lost, the suffering. Building off Sacred Scripture, we have the rich deposit of faith as it relates to Catholic social doctrine, from papal and Church documents to the examples of saints and leaders such as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin.

For many reasons, Assumption is uniquely positioned to offer this new

ministry. We have a long history of living the Catholic social teachings right here in the heart of St. Paul. In the late 1800's, Assumption established an orphanage to care for parentless German children. This became St. Joseph's home for Children, which eventually became Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The parish was instrumental in the opening of the Dorothy Day Center in 1981 serving those experiencing homelessness and food insecurity. Many of our parishioners still serve at several local outreach and community partners, lifting others in need and gaining a greater friendship with the poor who are our neighbors.

It is always encouraging to see individuals and families living out the Catholic social difference in their ordinary lives at home, at school, in workplaces and within the community. We can all continue to seek to learn and find new ways to challenge ourselves in deepening and living our faith. It is a primary mission of the Center to spread the message and practice of Catholic social teaching in ways that are challenging but accessible.

The Center for Catholic Social Thought will be a great resource for not only Assumption, but for the whole of the Archdiocese. I am pleased that Colin Miller, our Director of Outreach and Pastoral Care, is taking the lead as the Center's founding director. Colin, his family, along with his community are incredible witnesses to living the Catholic Social Teachings. As director for the Center, Colin has assembled solid speakers, great resources, and ongoing opportunities for greater understanding and conversation around living our faith more deeply.

The Catholic social teachings are rich treasures of the Church which transcend so much that divide us. With a greater

understanding, Assumption will continue its rich history of connecting the faithful from all over to help those in need and to make a Catholic social difference. With helpful content and ample opportunities for conversation and community we believe

the Center — of which this new *Catholic Citizen* publication is a part — will help us all better see as God sees, think with the mind of Christ, and orient ourselves toward action in living out the Gospel in the world around us.+

Upcoming Events for the Center

THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL DIFFERENCE SPEAKER SERIES

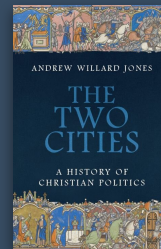
A series of weekly conversations with local Catholic leaders about living the Church's social teaching: community, economy, politics, and the Catholic difference. August-September 2023

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS FALL COURSE

A five-week course exploring the history of Christianity's relationship to politics. We will structure the class around Andrew Willard Jones' new book *The Two Cities: A History of Christian Politics* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2021).

CATHOLIC SOCIAL ROUNDTABLE

This ongoing discussion group is open to all and meets each 1st and 3rd Tuesday night from 5:30-7pm at Church of the Assumption in Saint Paul for a presentation and conversation.



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