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MY AMERICAN AFFAIR

This is in part a lecture, in part an essay in response to critics, and in part a confession. The confession is that I have, for a long time, been involved in an affair. Some of my fellow-Catholics believe that this affair is the occasion of grave public scandal.¹ The affair is with what I call the American experiment. That is closely related to what Fr. John Courtney Murray called the American proposition. The proposition is essential to the experiment, but it is more than a proposition. It is the lived experience of what may be the most ambiguously successful and influential social and political project in human history.

In 1975 I published a book titled *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation*. The use of the word "revelation" was a ill-advised, and I am today embarrassed by some of the specific political judgments in the book, for I was then a man of the establishment Left. But I stand by the gist of the argument. That argument was and is that the American experiment is better understood in terms of the narrative of covenant than the theory of social contract. The further argument is that in the American experiment God is up to something of significance for the entire human project. This is a matter of what the Second Vatican Council called "reading the signs of the times." In my discernment of the promise and perils of the American experiment, I associate myself with a long line of worthies stretching from John Winthrop to Jonathan Edwards to Alexis de Tocqueville to Abraham Lincoln to Cardinal Gibbons to Martin Luther King, Jr., to Ronald Reagan. These figures, as different among themselves as they are, represent a tradition of thinking about America that deserves more respectful attention from Catholic intellectuals than it has received to date.

When *Time Toward Home* appeared, it was reviewed in *Time* magazine, along with a profile of the author.¹ Under my picture the editors quoted me as saying, "When I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American." That was thought to be provocative, even scandalous, at the time. Remember that in 1975 the radicalisms of "the sixties" were still on a roll, and it was conventional on the Left to spell America with a "k," underscoring its allegedly fascist character. The article noted that, in leading a protest against the war in Vietnam, I insisted that those turning in their draft cards join in a lusty chorus of "America the Beautiful." The song, I said, is not about America as it is, but as it is called to be, and as we hoped to help it become. In innumerable speeches throughout the years of the civil rights and antiwar movements, I insisted upon using the phrase of the Pledge of Allegiance, that this is a nation "under God" - meaning, first of all, that it is a nation under judgment. As today my "Americanism" is criticized by some Catholics, so then it was attacked by many of my radical friends in what was called The Movement.

The anti-American turn of the Movement that began in the sixties, combined with its embrace of the drugs and sexual libertinism of the counter-culture -- including, most crucially, support for so-called abortion rights -- resulted in my breaking ranks with the Left and ending up in the company of those known as "the neoconservatives." You may recall Irving Kristol's famous definition: A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality. In fact, I have no investment whatever in the label "neoconservative." It is a term that has fallen out of general use, being kept alive by a few Catholic writers who regularly polemicize against the "Catholic neoconservatives" -- meaning mainly George Weigel, Michael Novak, and myself.

Returning to my affair with America, other autobiographical factors may be pertinent. As a Lutheran born in Canada of American citizens, I early sensed that the United States is the arena in which the great questions of Church and state, of the sacred and profane, of Augustine's city of man and City of God, were being played out on the world-historical stage. During my college and seminary years in the U.S., I immersed myself in the literature of the American experience; the vaulting vision of the Puritans, the Lockean-Calvinist

synthesis of the constitutional founding, and, above all, in the moral-political anguish of Abraham Lincoln's "crisis of the house divided."² As a Lutheran, and not incidentally a German Lutheran, I was struck also by the affinities between the Lutheran immigrant experience and that of Catholics in America. Lutheranism, at least in its more traditional forms, intends, like Catholicism, to be part of the Great Tradition, which includes the biblical, patristic, and medieval wrestlings with the right relationship between Christ and Caesar. For Lutherans, as for Catholics, their relationship to the American experiment was problematic -- socially, morally, and theologically.

Lutheranism is famous (others would say notorious) for its political ethic built around the concept of the "twofold kingdom of God" -- his "left hand" rule in the civil realm, and his "right hand" rule in the realm of salvation. The standard criticism of the "two kingdoms" theory is that it leads to Christian passivity and quietism in the face of social and political injustice, and there is truth in that criticism. My own appropriation of the Lutheran ethic, however, was powerfully formed by the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who in the last days of the war was executed for his role in rescuing Jews and conspiring against the regime of Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer's books -- for example, *Ethics*, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and *Life Together* -- deserve an honored place in any Catholic library of moral theology and spirituality. This was the theology of politics (I do not say political theology!) that informed and sustained my ministry as an inner city pastor in black Brooklyn, my work with Dr. King in the civil rights movement, and my part in the leadership of the antiwar movement, along with people such as Fr. Daniel Berrigan and the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

This theology of politics requires a vigorous ecclesiology. The City of God through time must be communally embodied in a "contrast society" that is able to stand over against what St. Paul calls the principalities and powers of the present age -- and, at the same time, to anticipate sacramentally the authentically new politics of the Kingdom of God. Over time, I came to conclude that Lutheranism could not, neither in theory nor in communal fact, provide such a vigorous ecclesiology. This is one of many factors -- and not the least important -- that led me into full communion with

the Catholic Church. I might mention, not so incidentally, that it is reasonable to believe from the evidence of his writings that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, had he lived, would also have become a Catholic.

Ecclesiology, the question of the Church, has been and continues to be the great question in my theology and my role as a public intellectual. Ecclesiology understood as *communio* -- the socially embodied sacramental participation in the life of the triune God through the risen Christ -- is the indispensable presupposition of the Church's continuing reflection on her relationship to Caesar; from the early martyrs, through the Constantinian settlement, to Pope Gregory VII and Henry IV at Canossa, to Pius X and modernism, to the 1991 encyclical of John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*. This ecclesiological story-line, most comprehensively and compellingly set forth by Augustine as the story of the City of God and the city of man, will continue until Our Lord returns in glory.

This is the story line advanced by the Catholic Church, which may be simply described as the Church of Jesus Christ most fully and rightly ordered through time. It is within this story line that we must understand the American experiment in all its maddening complexity. Protestantism, from the American beginnings to its present division between oldline liberalism and conservative evangelicalism, has long lost the ecclesiological story line. That is part of the argument of my 1984 book, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Today Catholics and evangelical Protestants are united in public tasks, most notably in contesting for the culture of life. Yet it is the case that, without a vibrant ecclesiology, American Protestantism is prone to identifying the Church, and even the Kingdom of God, with the American experiment. That way lies the temptation to idolatry, and the inevitability of bitter disillusionment, both of which are evident in the history and current state of American Protestantism.

At the same time, Catholics who have internalized the teaching of the Church know that the Protestant experience is not entirely alien to us, nor is it entirely outside the ecclesiological story line of which we are part. Christ and the Church are coterminous. Christ is present in that Protestant experience, and therefore, in a deep and irrepressible manner, the Church is present there as well. In the

words of the Second Vatican Council, they are "truly but imperfectly in communion" with the Catholic Church. The teaching of the Council, so powerfully advanced by this pontificate, makes it indisputably clear that to be an orthodox Catholic is to be an ecumenical Catholic. The American experiment -- so Protestant, so Calvinist, sometimes so expressly anti-Catholic -- is inextricably entangled with the ecclesiological story line of which we are part, which is the story of Christ through time. The genius of the Catholic spirit is to reach out to, comprehend, and bring to fuller expression whatever truth is to be found outside the formal boundaries of Catholicism itself. For Catholics to reject the American experiment and its political order as something irredeemably alien is, it seems to me, a species of sectarianism that is itself alien to the spirit and truth of Catholicism.

We are dealing here with the development of doctrine, about which John Henry Newman is the great teacher. The Catholic Church does not hesitate to acknowledge that she learns also from her declared enemies. Of the Church's teaching, Cardinal Newman writes:

From time to time it makes essays which fail, and are in consequence abandoned. It seems in suspense which way to go; it wavers, and at length strikes out in one definite direction. In time it enters upon strange territory; points of controversy alter their bearing; parties rise and fall around it; dangers and hopes appear in new relations; and old principles reappear under new forms. It changes with them in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.²

That there has been change is undeniable. For those who think with the Church (*sentire cum ecclesia*), it is not the change of discontinuity that corrects previous error, but the change of continuity, which is the further development of truth.

Enter Fr. John Courtney Murray. In my 1987 book, *The Catholic Moment*, Murray and what is termed the Murray Project have a prominent part. The Murray Project, to put it too simply, is

for Catholics to take the lead in providing a moral redirection of our public discourse and a better account of the American experiment itself. In my judgment, there are things that Murray did not do that he could have done, and some of what he did might have been better guarded against later misunderstandings and misinterpretations. There is hardly a theologian in the history of the Church of whom the same cannot be said. The fact remains that John Courtney Murray is one of the towering figures in the history of American Catholicism, and the basic intention of his project remains a work for generations to come.

Some Catholic writers today cast Murray as the intellectual villain, the architect of a Catholic accommodationism that was so eager to be accepted that it sold out the substance of the faith in exchange for respectability in the eyes of the secular establishment. This is an old charge against Murray, and was most acidly advanced in 1978 by sociologist John Murray Cuddihy -- who was, incidentally, a godson of Fr. Murray's -- in his book, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste*.³ Current efforts to dismiss, and even to deride, the work of Fr. Murray, including his contributions to Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom, are, I believe, inaccurate, wrongheaded, and, if I may so say, altogether unseemly.

Murray was keenly aware that the principles of the American founding, which can be supported by natural law, required also "a heritage of essential truth... that furnishes the substance of civil life."¹⁴ Far from being naively optimistic about what could be taken for granted in the moral health of the American culture, in the years before his death in 1969 he wrote with painful realism about the depletion of that "heritage of essential truth." Fr. Murray's reservations about trendy Americanisms extended also to his reservations about what he saw happening in the Church and in his own Society of Jesus.⁵ A much repeated criticism of Murray is that he viewed the American constitutional order, and the First Amendment in particular, as representing "articles of peace" rather than "articles of faith." A point that is little appreciated by his detractors is that, in light of centuries of religious warfare -- warfare in which the Catholic Church, too, was deeply complicit -- securing

articles of political peace with respect to ultimate truths is no little achievement.

The critics contrast, misleadingly I think, Murray and St. Augustine. In his *City of God*, a text that will be read until the Day of Judgment, Augustine viewed the Roman empire and all the polities of the world as the "city of man," as coercive and unjust orders premised upon the *libido dominandi* -- the lust for domination. The only just order is the City of God, which is premised not upon the love of power but upon the love of God. All polities short of the City of God are unacceptable, but, as Augustine understood and subsequent Christian thinkers, including Fr. Murray, have understood, some polities are less unacceptable than others in terms of human well-being and the securing of proximate justice. Short of the City of God, which is finally an eschatological achievement, "articles of peace" are not to be scorned.

We live in a pluralistic world of deep disagreements over ultimate truths. Murray wrote that pluralism is written into the script of history, to which I have added that it appears God has done the writing. Hans Urs von Balthasar says in his little book, *Truth is Symphonic*:

The unity of the composition comes from God. That is why the world was, is, and always will be pluralist (and -- why not? -- will be so increasingly). Of course, the world cannot get an overall view of its own pluralism, for the unity has never lain in the world either formerly or now. But the purpose of its pluralism is this: not to refuse to enter into the unity that lies in God and is imparted by him, but symphonically to get in tune with one another, and give allegiance to the transcendent unity.... Initially, [the players] stand or sit next to one another as strangers, in mutual contradiction, as it were. Suddenly, as the music begins, they realize how they are integrated. Not in unison, but what is far more beautiful -- in symphony.⁶

If I may extend Balthasar's fine image, the composition of the world is revealed by God in Christ, and the Church in her liturgy is now playing the music in which, as St. Paul says in Philippians 2, the entire world will one day join with a symphonically glorious

acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is Lord. But that day is not yet. Short of that day, we may be grateful for "articles of peace" in which the Church can publicly play God's music both in liturgy and in relentless public contention for what Murray called that "essential heritage of truth" without which civil society cannot be even proximately just. In this understanding, the *communio* of the Church is the contrast society, the people ahead of time, the prolepsis of the City of God that is to be -- and that even now keeps all polities in the city of man under transcendent judgment.

The alternative to pluralism is monism. Those who want now a polity based upon "articles of faith" may be harking back to an earlier era in Catholic social thought in which it was said that the "thesis" is a Catholic state in a Catholic society, and the "hypothesis" is whatever the Church has to temporarily settle for short of that, such as America's provisionally tolerable separation of church and state. In earthly polities, monism drives toward totalitarianism, as the bloodiness of history has shown time and again. Catholic monism today has its counterpart in certain forms of Protestant monism in what is called the "religious right" -- those small but influential Calvinist schools of thought that are called "theonomist" or "reconstructionist," and which deny the moral legitimacy of our constitutional order because it is not based, as they say, on "Bible Law." ⁷

Monisms of all varieties, whether religious or secular, are driven by what political philosopher Eric Voegelin termed "the immanentizing of the eschaton." Catholics intellectuals should give no aid or comfort to that way of thinking. It is in the sacramental life of the Church that the Eschaton is truly and rightly immanentized. From that sacramental life, informed and sustained by that life, the Catholic people enter the public square to be leaven and light; to cherish and cultivate human commonalities with those outside the Church, and thus to winsomely and persuasively redirect human hearts and habits to the truth -- who is also *their* truth, whether they know it or not -- namely, Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

All this the Church can do and, at her best, does do within the American constitutional order. It is a great disservice to this task to

propose a bizarre caricature of the American founding and the subsequent experience of liberal democracy. Some tell us that the American polity is entirely and without remainder the institutionalization of Augustine's *libido dominandi*. Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, slightly moderated by John Locke, they would have us believe, are the sole authors of the American founding. It is a strange thing to see Catholic writers joining with the declared enemies of the Catholic Church and of Christian influence in the public square by claiming that the American order is radically secularist and even atheistic. That claim flies in the face of everything we know about the founding experience.⁸ Is it believable for a moment that those who were involved in the writing of the Constitution and its ratification in the several states -- almost all of whom were committed Christians, usually of a Calvinist persuasion -- adopted a political system based on atheistic contract theory that is in fundamental conflict with their covenantal understanding of society and history? It is, I submit, not believable. They did not think they were doing that, and they did not do that.

Moreover, the American experiment, although inseparable from the founding, is much more than the founding. Here the crucial figure is Abraham Lincoln, who recognized weaknesses in the founding, most conspicuously with respect to the issue of slavery. Lincoln did want a polity premised upon something like "articles of faith." In his view, the political community is the bearer of, and holds itself accountable to, ultimate truth. Harry Jaffa comments eloquently on the Gettysburg Address:

The sacrifices both engendered and required by that truth -- for the lapses from the faith are, in a sense, due to the moral strain imposed by its loftiness -- transforms that nation dedicated to [that truth] from a merely rational and secular one, calculated to 'secure these rights' -- i.e. the rights of individuals -- into something whose value is beyond all calculation. The 'people' is no longer conceived in the Gettysburg Address, as it is in the Declaration of Independence, as a contractual union of individuals existing in a present; it is as well a union with ancestors and with posterity; it is organic and sacramental.⁹

Jaffa exaggerates, I believe, the purely contractual and individualistic character of the Declaration, but he is surely right about Lincoln's view of the American experiment as organic and sacramental. And it is worth noting that, in the moment of the most severe testing of that experiment, Lincoln's view prevailed. Indeed, Lincoln thought it necessary to establish the American proposition as a "political religion" comparable to that institution of which it was said that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. This again illustrates the Protestant propensity, in the absence of an adequate ecclesiology, to make a church of the nation.

There are great dangers in a polity founded upon "articles of faith," as there are great deficiencies in a polity founded upon "articles of peace." The history of liberal democracy in the American Republic oscillates between those dangers and those deficiencies. The role of the Church is to embody and articulate the greater truth to which those "articles of faith" point, even as that greater truth requires that we cherish and secure the "articles of peace."

We need not choose, and we must not choose, between contract and covenant; the contract is within the covenant, and the covenant provides the interpretive horizon of the contract. The great danger of our time is, I believe, clearly addressed by John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus*: As George Weigel demonstrates in his magnificent biography, *Witness to Hope*, this Pope has an understanding of liberal democracy, informed also by the American experience, that is unprecedented in magisterial teaching. John Paul writes in *Centesimus Annus*:

Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that the truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy

without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism. (45)

"Thinly disguised totalitarianism" -- that aptly describes what threatens America under a radically secularized interpretation of our constitutional order, an interpretation relentlessly advanced by the courts in what some of us have called the judicial usurpation of politics. Catholics, in cooperation with others, need to marshal all our resources to challenge that interpretation of the American founding. What appear to be current efforts to revive the "Americanist" controversy, and claims that this constitutional order is fundamentally incompatible with Catholic faith and life, are, I believe, a mischievous distraction from our historic obligation and opportunity. According to some, Leo XIII's apostolic letter of 1899, *Testem Benevolentiae*, was worried about a "phantom heresy." I am not convinced that the heresy was or is entirely a phantom.

There were and there are Catholics -- on both the Right and the Left -- who believe that there is a choice to be made between being Catholic and being American. The heresy of Americanism, if it is heresy, is not in affirming the laws and customs and polity of this country, which are expressly not in question according to *Testem Benevolentiae*. What is questioned, what is indeed condemned in that letter, is the idea of a national church with only tenuous ties to the universal ministry of Rome. Once again, the question is ecclesiological. The tendency, notably among liberals, to think of the American Church as a national church is by no means a thing of the past. In the three decades since the Council, much energy has been expended in defining what it means to be an "American Catholic," in demonstrating a distinctively American way of being Catholic. The great challenge, I believe, is not to be American Catholics but to be Catholic Americans -- to demonstrate the distinctively Catholic way of being America. The idea is to sympathetically engage and strive to transform the piece of history where we are called to keep the faith. In the Church's social doctrine, that is called the process of "inculturation." For that, we Catholic Americans will continue to need something like the Murray Project.

The second century "Letter to Diognetus" says of those strange people, the Christians:

Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland a foreign country.²¹⁰

Shall we who are alien citizens in this foreign country -- this United States of America that is so far from the City of God -- refuse to call it our homeland? I hope not. This is our moment and our place in time -- all time being time toward our true home.

I have tried, then, to give an account, all too briefly, of my American affair. I am truly sorry that some think my affair is an occasion of public scandal. What I told Time magazine all those years ago continues to be the case. "When I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American." Not most importantly as an American, to be sure. There are much more important things that define who we are, beginning with our baptism into the *communio* of Christ and his Church, which is infinitely more important. So it is not most importantly as Americans that we are answerable to God, but it is inescapably as Americans. To those Catholics thinkers who find this problematic, I can only say that I, too, find it problematic -- deeply problematic. But history and history's Lord provide us with no alternative. The promise of "the Catholic moment" calls us to recognize the place and time of our destiny, and to embrace that destiny as our task.

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¹ Representative of the critics to whom this essay responds is David L. Schindler, as, for instance, in his *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation*, and his several criticisms in recent years of the neoconservative "gang of three," Michael Novak, George Weigel, and this author in *Communio*. Also Kenneth Craycraft in [name of new book from Spence]. See also the manifesto issued by sundry Catholic editors and writers [Erik: name of manifesto and date. This is discussed some years ago in psq.] Similar criticisms, from a decidedly "leftist" viewpoint, have been made by Fr. Michael Baxter of Notre Dame.

¹ Time, Oct 20, 1975

² Harry Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, Chicago

² Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, page 40

³ Seabury, 1978

⁴ *We Hold These Truths*, Sheed & Ward, 1960. p. 10

⁵ See [the article we published by him a few years ago]. For his reflections on the Church and the Society of Jesus, see also Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs*. On this point, I am indebted also to Fr. Joseph Komanchek of Catholic University, who has done extensive work in the Murray archives.

⁶ Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*. Ignatius. 1987. page 9

⁷ RJN, "Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation." *First Things*. May 1990

⁸ For a recent and very accessible summary, see James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*. Library of Congress. 1998.

⁹ Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*. Chicago. 1982. page 228

¹⁰ A suggestive commentary on the letter is Rowan A. Greer's *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church*. Pennsylvania State. 1986