

CATHOLIC POSITIVIST OR POSITIVIST CATHOLIC: WHY DID CATHOLICS FOLLOW MAURRAS?

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How can all of this be explained? Only by the discernment of the spirits that illuminate the saints. A great and only a great saint like Pius XII can understand and interpret another saint, Saint Pius X.

—Father Meinvielle's commentary a propos the rehabilitation of Charles Maurras into the Catholic Church.¹

Maritain once wrote that his involvement with the French nationalist movement, Action Française, thinking it an ally of the Thomist renaissance, was one of the greatest regrets of his life. Despite Charles Maurras's agnosticism and anti-Semitism, the views of the founder of Action Française seemed to have charmed the Catholic philosopher as well as most of the Catholic intelligentsia in the 1910s and 1920s, from Cardinal Billot to Father Garrigou-Lagrange. Undeniably, by the early 1920s, a large portion of the French Church was unapologetically Maurrasian, sharing some or most of Maurras's claims about the nature of the temporal political order.

This alliance between Catholic action and Maurrasian thought is more peculiar than one might think. Certainly, there was a common interest between the French Church and Action Française in restoring the French monarchy. But, beyond a common political goal, the two camps became strange bedfellows: Maurras was a materialistic thinker, influenced by positivism, who claimed that politics is the "daughter of biology." Members of the Church, obviously averse to such naturalistic reductionism, for some odd reason—which we will explore in this paper—found Maurras's work congenial to the Church's mission. This exploration will take three parts: first, a summary of the long Catholic involvement with Maurras among French intellectuals; second, an overview of Maurras's philosophical ideas on politics and nature; and

¹ Julio Meinvielle, *Concepción Católica de la Política* [*The Catholic Conception of Politics*] (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Dictio, 1974), 194.

third, I will list four reasons for the Catholic admiration of Maurras, and show how Jacques Maritain can be seen as an authentic Catholic alternative to Maurras.

Maurras was a product of nineteenth-century positivism, and hence the fundamental question (which I will try to answer) is: for what reasons did an apostate positivist fascinate the minds of Catholic intellectuals?

I. MAURRAS AND THE CATHOLICS

Le Comité de L'Action Française, formed in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, had a seemingly clear objective: to condemn and attack the egalitarian and centralizing legacy of the French Revolution.² Henry Vaugeois and Maurice Pujo founded the organization in 1898 in part to confront the supposed "Jewish conspiracy." Within a year, in 1899, they obtained some significance with the assistance of an ambitious young intellectual named Charles Maurras. The enemy for them was the Republic, which was, so the Action Française faithful would say, run by the Jews who were protecting the interests of a bourgeoisie intoxicated by egalitarianism.

There was a bitter confrontation, an undeclared battle, in the imagery of Maurras, between the cosmopolitan, elitist Parisian liberal intellectuals and politicians and the allegedly "backwards" rural communities; between a culture that had invented a France which was formal, legalistic and empty, and another that was decisively more real, natural and historical; between the "legal" nation and the "real" nation. Republicanism was thus synonymous with the historical betrayal of the authentic essence of the French nation; it was running against that which Maurras called "the permanences of the past," a rejection of an "organic community with deep roots in the French past and soil."³

² "In 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had served on the French general staff, was convicted by a military court of spying for the Germans and transported to Devil's Island. Gradually over the next few years, it became apparent that Dreyfus had been framed, chosen as a convenient scapegoat partly because he was Jewish, partly because he hailed from the province of Alsace which, since 1871, had been ruled by Germany" (Alan Cassels, *Fascism* [Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1975], 231).

³ *Ibid.*, 234.

Maritain was not an exception among those Catholic intellectuals attracted to Maurras, and he supported nationalist causes for many years. Following his spiritual director Fr. Humbert de Clerissac—"I confided myself to the wisdom of my director, he who introduced me to St. Thomas"—Maritain, once an admirer of the socialist Jaurès, became the visible Thomistic "sidekick" of Maurras, although not without reservations. Reading his early book, *Antimoderne*, he appears a natural ally of Maurras. In 1926, however, following Pius XI's expression of concern over the negative influence that Maurras's movement had had on a whole generation of Catholics, Maritain wrote his well-known, *An Opinion on Charles Maurras and the Duty of Catholics*. In this work, he examined the main thesis of the Action Française movement and broke with Maurras. The concern of the pope was not without reason—into the twenties, the movement still continued to exercise a considerable influence among Catholics.⁴ Everything changed in 1926 with Pius XI's condemnation of Action Française; many Catholics abandoned the Church out of loyalty to Maurras, and many clergymen showed their disapproval of the papal measure, a crisis which would only end a decade later when Pius XII reversed the condemnation in 1939.⁵

But Maurras's influence, like Maritain's later on, was not confined to the French scene. Natalicio Gonzalez, a Latin American nationalist thinker who became president of Paraguay in the 1940s, was unapologetic about his Maurrasian, rural, anti-republican, and openly anti-Semitic inspiration. The French Liberal constitution, he wrote in 1935, "represents the Judaic conception of the fatherland, a conception proper to the wandering nation which lacks a physical manifestation on the globe. But for a Frenchman, for instance, son of an old sedentary and rural race which feels attached to the soil of their ancestors, the fatherland is something else."⁶ Likewise, for Gonzalez, as for the many other Latin American nationalists of the so-called "indigenist or

⁴ Ibid., 230.

⁵ Norman Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation 1589-1989* (New York: Routledge, 1954), 222.

⁶ "Es la concepción judaica de la patria, concepción propia de esa nación errante que carece de expresión física sobre el globo. Pero para un francés, por ejemplo, hijo de una vieja raza sedentaria y agricultura, que se siente adherida a la tierra de sus mayores, la patria es cosa diversa" (J. Natalicio Gonzalez, *El Paraguay Eterno* [*The Eternal Paraguay*] [Mayo: Editorial Cuadernos Republicanos, 1986], 111).

nativist” generation, the liberal doctrine was seen as the “poison which intoxicated the soul of the fatherland.”⁷

Latin American nationalism was closely associated with the desire for the political and social transformation of their countries. Their goal was to achieve complete economic independence, but, before that, a complete intellectual autonomy, a change of mind. Indeed, as much as they rejected the influence of large urban (and foreign) industrial centers on their countries, taking advantage of small agricultural centers, they aimed at creating an outlook that could reflect the “soul” of rural, nativist communities. And, for that, the cosmopolitan spirit of liberalism was a fatal toxin. Gonzalez’s critique of liberalism was not unique. There were also a visible number of members of the Catholic clergy and lay leaders who did the same, especially between the 1920s and the 1940s. Figures like Cesar Pico, Ernesto Palacio, Fr. Julio Meinvielle, and the writer Leopoldo Lugones in Argentina all wrote bitter critiques of liberalism, and all were, ironically, inspired by a foreigner: Charles Maurras.⁸

But why were Maurras’s ideas so attractive to the highest ranks of the Latin American and European Catholic intelligentsia of the time? A close examination of his philosophical approach to politics shows areas of congeniality between his own empiricism and the Aristotelian realism of Catholic thinkers.

II. MAURRAS’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Maurras’s idea that politics is the daughter of biology is the result of his fidelity to nineteenth-century naturalism. First comes the Maurrasian empirical method and philosophical anthropology, and from these ideas spring forth his views on politics, morality, and monarchy. Maurras’s starting point, as he suggests, is an intuition of order which is also an *end*.⁹ Order is inseparable from being. Being, if it

⁷ “La doctrina liberal es el veneno que emponzoña el alma de la patria” (Ibid., 113).

⁸ Alberto Caturelli, *La Política de Maurras y la Filosofía Cristiana* [*The Political Philosophy of Maurras and Christian Philosophy*] (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nuevo Orden, 1975), 68.

⁹ Charles Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas* [*My Political Ideas*], translated by Julio Irazusta (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemul, 1962).

is truly being, is ordered being. Being is order.¹⁰ If order were not the founding principle, then only disorder and nothingness would follow, because nothing falls outside being. Order thus becomes the ultimate foundation of reality. This view of order allows Maurras to draw some analogies between natural order, social order and, ultimately, political order, seeing in them increasingly higher degrees of reality. Order thus implies the recognition of an ontological principle to which everything corresponds. And it is this submission to an ultimate ontological principle that would make him reject any subjectivism.

The task of the philosopher should be subsequently to see how order-as-being is manifested within the whole of human experience. The method, accordingly, is an “organized empiricism,” taking into account that “organization” is one of the names of order.¹¹ This empiricism looks to the physical data: human experience is limited to what actually counts, namely, facts—whether historical, social, or political. Experience becomes, as a consequence, the beginning of knowledge, and, from that experience, truth can be deduced to establish an exact course of events.¹² Human knowledge is concretely experiential—a concreteness which tries to avoid any formalism and abstraction. The modern tendency towards formalism and abstraction, Maurras argues, is due to the influence of liberal ideology, creating as a result an empty construct detached from reality.

Maurras’s starting point of being-as-order seems to give theoretical reason primacy over practical reason; he even argues that “though man is far from having resolved the practical problems of daily life, he has [the principle] with which he can resolve them.”¹³ Consequently, there is always a matter-of-fact solution, because there are, in theoretical terms, certain true principles to be applied. But was not this the same Maurras who, as an activist, stressed the importance of politics over abstract thought? Without a doubt, Maurras seemed to be putting an emphasis on the practical while stressing the primacy of the theoretical. In fact, it will be precisely this seemingly Maurrasian

¹⁰ Alberto Caturelli, *La Política de Maurras y la Filosofía Cristiana*, 12.

¹¹ Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas*, 147.

¹² *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

emphasis on the practical, one of his most contentious views, which will be seen as potentially incompatible with the Catholic tradition.

Nature is a cause, Aristotle affirms, that operates for a purpose. Nothing in it seems to indicate otherwise. Reality is reasonable; that is, it does everything with an aim. That things have a cause indicates that reality is not self-sufficient. Their being is brought about by something, that is, by a source from which their generation comes. Maurras's exclusively biological conception of nature seems to suggest, in a similar way, a certain teleology. He seems to assert that we ought to discover the "law" of nature, which objectively exists before any consideration. This puts him in close association with Aristotle, despite his materialistic view of reality. No doubt, Maurras's agnosticism prevented him from arguing for God as the ultimate principle of the order of things. Nor was he a metaphysician.

Maurras' naturalism and empiricism are of fundamental importance to his thought, because, from nature, nations and civilizations emerge. This in turn accounts for what he calls "political realism," a realism embodied in history, because it is in "[the] laboratory of universal history that man finds himself as a subject and object of experience"; for that reason, "our teacher in politics is experience."¹⁴ Hence the conclusion: politics is the daughter of biology, and "biological ideas make possible putting political science in condition of perceiving quite well the essence of political heritage," because "man, as a social being, is also a living being, placed under the law of life."¹⁵

But this living being, man, is not a solitary being; rather, he is what he is by relating to others. "Man," he writes, "consists in [an] imaginary friendship."¹⁶ Furthermore, "it is friendship which is the glue of the foundation of the city."¹⁷ This picture of man does not prevent Maurras from adhering to a quasi-Hobbesian view of man, a Hobbesian view with an optimistic twist: though man can devour and be devoured by others and also crushed by the demands of living, he also has the

¹⁴ Ibid., 151.

¹⁵ Ibid., 140.

¹⁶ Catureli, *La Política de Maurras y la Filosofía Cristiana*, 18.

¹⁷ Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas*, 17.

potential to become "God for man."¹⁸ Individualism, for Maurras, is a view contrary to the evidence of nature.

Nature shields the thinker from ideology. It serves as a bulwark against artificial impositions, against the myth of liberalism, against the myth of egalitarianism. This last myth, for Maurras, is especially pernicious. He writes: "Rousseau believed that inequality comes from civilization. But what happened is the opposite; society, civilization, was born out of inequality. None of the civilizations could have been born out of equality."¹⁹ Democratic majorities tend to destroy the "biological" inequality among human beings; in "biology equality is feasible only in the cemetery."²⁰ Hence equality cannot be the starting point of life; it will prevent progress from happening. Progress is, instead, aristocratic.²¹ This "biologism," however, does not eliminate human freedom; rather, it makes freedom possible at the end of the historical process.²²

Maurras the thinker protested that he and his countrymen were being betrayed by a foreign philosophy, which denied the facts stated above. Luckily, Maurras the activist had a solution: the restoration of the monarchy would be the cure to the disease of liberal republicanism. The foundations for his model of society and state were observation, empirical data, original sociability of man, and protective inequality. For Maurras, politics is the imperative that creates the conditions for a prosperous life of communities.²³ It does not exist in a vacuum, but requires temporal primacy over abstract thought.

Where does morality fit into Maurras's political philosophy? Maurras seems to answer rather ambiguously; politics is the realm of government. Politics seeks a perfection of "forms," of "political forms."²⁴ Morality inquires about human, spiritual perfection, pursues a sort of personal salvation.²⁵ Thus, morality and politics are distinct,

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

²⁰ Ibid., 141.

²¹ Ibid., 23.

²² Ibid., 102.

²³ Ibid., 148.

²⁴ Ibid., 164.

²⁵ Caturelli, *La Política de Maurras y la Filosofía Cristiana*, 42.

although not completely separate.²⁶ But this distinction would lead to a complete dualism later on.²⁷ Precisely this view paved the way toward not only Machiavellian “realism,” but also toward an unintended, ironically liberal view of society. The fragmentation of order and the emphasis on individual conscience were two tenets of liberalism, but these two tenets could also be extrapolated from Maurras’s unintended dualism.

Monarchy meant neither absolutism nor necessarily despotism; rather, monarchy would provide continuity, tradition, and stability, whereas liberal democracy had brought discontinuity, centralization, and fragmentation. Monarchy “confers to politics the advantages of human personality: conscience, memory, reason, and will.”²⁸ Hence, Maurras’ political naturalism was actually undermining his monarchism. The stress here is naturalistic, not ideological: Maurras suggests that “spontaneous institutions” arise from the soil of society.²⁹

Continuing in this naturalistic mode, laws are seen as the expression of relations between things; they spring from the nature of things. They are discovered in nature; they are not foreign to them. As a consequence, the state is the organ of society, which means that society is prior to the establishment of a state. So the family, as an essential unit of society, is what brings the state into being.³⁰ That makes the state a “family of families,” a gathering of communities, intermediate associations, groups, corporations, etc. This is what makes for a “real” country. Thus, the Maurrasian distinction between a “real” and “legal” country becomes clear. Whatever the ideology, Marxism or liberalism, it can only produce a “legal” or “formal” country, an artificial construct contrary to the nature of things, opposing the interests of real people.

None of the laws of history—Maurras argues, criticizing Marx—have consecrated one class to combat another.³¹ Liberalism goes against nature by trying to centralize and unify the social body and destroying it in the process. To organize a liberal democracy is an ironic task,

²⁶ Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas*, 63.

²⁷ Caturelli, *La Política de Maurras y la Filosofía Cristiana*, 52.

²⁸ Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas*, 287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

according to Maurras, because the seeds of its own destruction lie within its way of organization. Ideology leads to disorder because it does not take the natural order into account. That is why both Marxism and liberalism created violent revolutions; they are ideologies of disunion, an aggression against the natural order of things; they have not respected the family. Here Maurras sounds almost like a Catholic.

III. FOUR REASONS CATHOLICS ADOPTED MAURRAS

There were four reasons that prompted many Catholics to adopt Maurrasian views. The first was his apparent Aristotelianism. Granted, Maurras never claimed to be a metaphysician, but there was a noticeable realist starting point in his thought: that the universe of sensible things is the beginning of knowledge and can be grasped intellectually through our senses. "Young man, do you believe that materialism is the worst error of the moment? This is false! It is idealism. Why? Because it is the greater lie!" Maurras used to repeat this very often.³² Although Maurras reduced nature to physical nature, his rejection of formal thinking made him attractive to realist-minded Catholics. That realist foundation helped him confront, as Fr. Meinvielle points out, two errors condemned by the Church, liberalism and socialism.³³ Maurras's usefulness in this regard, Meinvielle suggests, prevented Pope Pius X from condemning Action Française early on.

The rejection of democracy as a viable alternative was the second reason for the Catholic embrace of Maurras. Many Catholic thinkers shared with Maurras an understanding of democracy that came completely from Rousseau and was thus based on an abstract and rugged individualism which had no attachment to natural community and delegated all liberties to a depersonalized general will. As a result of this mistaken view, the liberal regime had given to its people a set of hollow rights and liberties, and left people and society naked and unprotected. Democracy thus had to be rejected and Maurras posed an alternative for Catholics to adopt.

³² Henri Massis, cited in Maurras, *Mis Ideas Políticas*, 90.

³³ Julio Meinvielle, "La Física Política de Charles Maurras y la Política Cristiana," [The Physical Politics of Charles Maurras and Christian Politics], in Meinvielle, *Concepción Católica de la Política*, 187.

A third reason was Maurras's return to monarchy. Indeed, Maurras's adherence to monarchy—a consequence of his political realism, which amounted to a strictly empiricist approach to history—was shared by many. In an almost Thomistic way, Maurras thought that monarchy was the best form of government because it would bring unity, stability, and counter the effects of urbanization and industrialization that had destroyed many communities and cost the Church much in terms of property. A royalist regime was also seen as more friendly towards religion. Maurras admits that “monarchy is not exempt from difficulties,” and that this form of government is not perfect, because “none of the forms are perfect, but [monarchy] is the least imperfect of all.”³⁴ The French monarchy had to be restored for practical, prudential reasons, and Catholic thinkers thought those reasons in their interest.

Finally, the last and most important reason for the Catholic fascination with Maurras was the lack of political imagination on the part of Catholics as to how to assume the challenges of the times. Could the new ideologies be reconciled with the Catholic perspective? There were some attempts in this direction, with movements like *Le Sillon* of Marc Sangnier during the last years of Leo XIII's papacy. Having succeeded Leo on August 4, 1903, Pope Pius X frustrated *Le Sillon*'s aspirations in 1910 by condemning the movement in the encyclical *Notre Charge Apostolique*. Pius X believed that Sangnier's ideal of rallying Catholics and non-Catholics in one political movement represented a risky political eclecticism. The *Sillonists*' assumption that a true Catholic political movement had to be exclusively democratic was declared to be in error.

Behind this papal reaction, however, there were many other reasons, some more political than intellectual in character. Members of the Roman Curia, such as the French conservative cardinals Louis Billot and Merry del Val (the pope's Secretary of State), were close to *Action Française*, which they took to be an increasingly important royalist movement. Not surprisingly, they also disliked movements like *Le Sillon*. Despite these antipathies, at the time of the condemnation, Germany and Belgium already had formed Catholic democratic parties, and the ideals of *Le Sillon* were not completely suppressed by the papal disapproval. They were revived in a new movement, the *Jeune République*, in 1912. Thus, by the turn of the century, Catholics—

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

especially French Catholics—seemed to be divided on the possibility of reconciling Christianity and democracy. The Dreyfus affair, the intensified secularization of education, the anti-clerical Combes laws of 1904, and, finally, the breaking of diplomatic relations between the French government and Rome in 1905 increased the disagreements between “Catholic democrats” and “Catholic conservatives.” However, a strong tendency indicated that the political mood of Catholics in the Third Republic was dominated by the Right and that the majority of Catholics inclined to the conservative side. Within this context, Maurras and Action Française became the answer.

Thus, despite Maurras’s religious skepticism, there were a substantial number of clergymen and lay people who supported his movement. Maurras provided not only ideological support for order but also (to those Catholics whose religious faith was waning) the confidence that faith and social position did not have to rest solely on supernatural justification. These could also be sustained by naturalism and realism. This argument, with its Thomistic resonances, attracted many for whom natural, and not only supernatural, order was the base for political society. Jacques Maritain, after rejecting Maurras, thus was in a the odd position of seemingly rejecting a Thomistic point of view, or at least a point of view compatible with the thought of St. Thomas.

And yet it was Maritain’s prophetic voice that inaugurated a new era, first with his critique of Maurras’s naturalism and, above all, with his new historical model, that of the New Christendom. That was the beginning of a new Catholic political thinking that was assuming the challenges of modernity, moving beyond a siege mentality. Maritain reconciled the march of history with the Catholic intelligentsia. The Brazilian Alceu Amoroso Lima, assessing Maritain’s impact, called Maritain’s philosophy a “new dawn” for the Catholic political tradition, and divided the political history of Latin America into two periods: before Maritain and after Maritain—before the victory over the Latin American Maurrasians, and after.³⁵ Indeed, Maritain’s proposal or “Maritainismo”—as it was very often called—was a concrete path for uniting the real and formal country, a model for reconciling Catholicism and liberal democracy, the true rallying-point between the past and the present.

³⁵ See Alceu Amoroso Lima, “Testimony: On the Influence of Maritain in Latin America,” *The New Scholasticism* 46, no. 1 (1972): 70-85.

I am, of course, not suggesting that the Catholic “use” of Maurras’s views was due to his positivistic perspective. Rather, the appeal of Maurras was due to his philosophical method, a way of confronting reality that, at the same time, was seen as an intellectual tool in the cultural war against modernity. This method was an empirical one, but an empiricism that, to a certain extent, was open to reality; an empiricism that prompted, eventually, the rediscovery of Aristotle and Aquinas through the natural order.³⁶ In the end, however, we can see that the Catholic admiration for Maurras was the result of a lack of political imagination on the part of the Catholic intelligentsia, more attuned, perhaps, to a nineteenth-century siege mentality, and not fully open to confronting the challenges of a changing world.

³⁶ See Julio Meinvielle in “Empirical Politics of Charles Maurras and Christian Politics,” *Concepción Católica de la Política*, 87.