

The "Liberal Catholicism" Against the Omnivorous State

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Avvenire

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The Holy Father's letter to the Head of Italian State, Mr. Giorgio Napolitano, on March 17 for the 150th anniversary of Italian unity, offers us an opportunity to reflect on an issue widely debated in the history of Christian social thought: the relationship between the social doctrine of the Church and liberal political theory. We would like to specify that we refer to liberalism as a theory of political order and institutions, in practice, a theory that posits the limits of political power. This is a reflection on the sidelines of the statement of Benedict XVI about a "healthy liberal concept" (His words).

In order to understand this important statement we believe is useful to examine some assumptions of liberal political theory in the same context in which Benedict XVI puts this claim: the "Catholic liberal thought" (His words). Indeed, already in his speech to civil and religious authorities in Westminster, on September 17, Benedict XVI underlined the peculiar and political characters conform to the vision that the social Church's Doctrine has of the policy: "the parliamentary tradition; the balance between the legitimate claims of government and the rights of those subject to it; the limits on the exercise of power; the freedom of speech; the freedom of political affiliation and respect for the rule of law; the equality of all citizens before the law". The typical characters of the "liberal and political approach", capable of promoting the dignity of the person, the duty of civil authorities to promote the common good and a notion of common good that can be solved in a plural and polyarchical view of the political, economic and cultural institutions, not reducible to a unitary and centralized perspective.

The identification of a liberal political method allows us to separate the positives aspects of liberalism from its historical manifestations, in order to direct them in different political cultures, which can become a strong common denominator to be spent in the concrete political activity. The experience of Fr. Luigi Sturzo proves this: he recognized the liberalism to have introduced two mandatory principles for civilization: the "method of liberty" and the "representative method". Freedom is never peacefully acquired, but it is a goal to be achieved in the course of history, embodying the form of freedom in institutional forms, according to the canons of constitutionalism and against the "omnivorous State": this form of "State" tries to annihilate those who threaten to curb its powers: the local governments and civil society, families and other institutions, the nature of group and organizational capacity of intermediary bodies.

To ensure pluralism is then the representative method. Christian anthropology enriches the meaning of this freedom and this power of the people, avoiding to personify the "State" or the masses, but referring to actual people who work in institutions, with all that corollary of anti-

perfectism and contingency (so much declared-denounced by Manzoni and Rosmini), to get up to the Sturzo's theorists of the methodological personalism.

In times of unrest and upheaval, it should be noted that a "healthy liberal concept", based on Christian anthropological perspective, provides the method for the bloodless change of political regimes and, in order to ensure development through the peaceful settlement of social conflict to inside of the constitutional framework, returns-at the domestic, international, global level-the image of a stratified and subsidiary order that is born from the vitality and pluralism of civil society: this is the basis for a notion of common good in conformity with the dignity of the human person.

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