



The Rights of Man

What are the “rights” of man?

The word “right” has two meanings: a traditional meaning and a meaning introduced by the Jesuit Father Francisco Suarez:

- According to the traditional meaning, a right is “what is just”;
- According to the new meaning, a right is the moral power to act, demand, or omit something. This power is based on human dignity and society should guarantee its existence and exercise. ¹

What is the consequence of this change of vocabulary?

The same word means first “what is just” and next “the moral faculty of demanding it”, which is only a consequence of the existence of “what is just”. But, if the word henceforth means an effect of the cause, the cause itself (what is just) no longer has any word to express it. Quite naturally, men end up:

- forgetting the cause, and the Thomistic doctrine connected with it;
- over-emphasising the importance of the effect (the “moral faculty” of the person) and thus turn towards to Personalism.

By adopting this change of vocabulary, Leo XIII, Pius XI and Pius XII have initiated an overture to Personalism: the rights of the person superseding the quest for the Common Good. ²

But what is the Good?

The Good is that towards which everything tends as to its perfection.

What is its relationship with the Common Good?

St Thomas writes, “The good of the individual cannot exist without the common good of the family, of the city or of the kingdom. This is why Valerius Maximus said of the ancient Romans: ‘they preferred to be poor in a rich empire rather than rich in a poor empire.’” ³

1 - Arnaud DE LASSUS, above mentioned lecture, p. 4.

2 - Arnaud DE LASSUS, *ibid.*, p. 4.

3 - Louis MILLET, *Le Bien et la Personne, remarques sur le « Personalisme » et sur quelques thèses modernes* [*The Good and the Person, Remarks about “Personalism” and Some Other Modern Theses*], AFS-173.

Does the Common Good take precedence over the individual person?

Yes, we call this the Principle of Totality, which Pope Pius XII defines as follows:

This principle asserts that the part exists for the whole and that, consequently, the good of the part remains subordinated to the good of the whole, that the whole is a determining factor for the part and can dispose of it in its own interest. [...] The principle of totality itself affirms only this: where the relationship of a whole to its part holds good, and in the exact measure it holds good, the part is subordinated to the whole and the whole, in its own interest, can dispose of the part. ⁴

St Thomas clarifies: “**According to nature**, the city has priority over the individual.” ⁵

In which order does this apply?

This applies in the **natural order**, as St Thomas pointed out.

Must we conclude that the city always takes precedence over the individual?

Marcel De Corte adds: “The person, **taken from the viewpoint of his temporal destiny**, is radically ordered to the common good of the temporal society, of which he is a member.” ⁶ Yet, what is true in the natural order, is not necessarily so in the supernatural order. Thus, the ultimate objective is that of the Church Herself and of Her sons: to cause the greatest number of souls to reach eternal salvation.

For this reason, Fr. Meinvielle, quoting St Thomas, adds:

It is evident that all who are living in a community, stand in relation to that community as parts to a whole” (II-II Q. 5, a. 5, c). Nevertheless, man is not subordinated to the political community with all his being and all his possession – “*secundum se totum et secundum omnia sua*” (I-II, Q. 24, a. 4, ad 3), but only inasmuch as his acts have a temporal and public character. This potential and partial subordination of man to the earthly city is itself subordinated to the other aspect, which has the uncreated Good as its ultimate end.

The Church, which has always taught the moral obligation to obey civil power, never sacrificed the rights of God to civil power, for the former have priority over those of man. On this count, martyrs give us the most convincing lesson.

The human person, who is relatively subordinated to the good of the State as a part to a whole, albeit with a certain relativity, is also subordinated, with a lesser relativity, to the supernatural good communicated by the Church, and is totally and absolutely subordinated to God Who is the common Good of all (II-II, Q. 26, a. 3, c). ⁷

Today, does not the Church have the Rights of Man prevail in the natural order?

According to Fr. Simoulin, SSPX:

Since Leo XIII, the Magisterium of the Church has intended to meddle with and give definitions concerning issues which do not fall within its own authority; philosophy, organization of labour, economy, [...] etc. Doubtless, these issues certainly remain more or less closely related to dogma [...]. However, with this increased use of philosophical argument, the authority of the Magisterium could only lose its cogency since such argument is foreign to it. All the more so because Popes wanted to “hijack” concepts and analyses developed outside the Church way of thinking or tradition... ⁸

4 - An address given on September 14, 1952 by Pius XII to the First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System.

5 - *In octo libros Politicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, I, I. 1 No. 39, quoted by Fr. Jean Marc RULLEAU, in *Morale et Politique [Morals and Politics]* – Note, *Le Sel de la terre [The Salt of the Earth]*, Avrillé Dominicans’ magazine, No. 47, Winter 1993, p. 181.

6 - Quoted by Arnaud DE LASSUS, above mentioned lecture, p. 2.

7 - Fr. Julio MEINVIELLE, op. cit., p. 36.

8 - *Vu de Haut [Seen from Above]*, No. 7, *Les droits de l’homme [The Rights of Man]*, éditions Fideliter, 1982.

Consequently, they laid the steppingstone for a doctrinal drift preparing the conciliar Personalism: “The common good of human society is at the service of persons”, the *Instruction on Liberation and Christian Liberty* of 22 March, 1986 says.

Could you give examples of what could be considered as an incipient drift?

In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII points out: “There is no need to bring in the State. Man precedes the State, and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body.”

Next, Pius XI, in *Divini Redemptoris*:

But God has likewise destined man for civil society according to the dictates of his very nature. In the plan of the Creator, society is a natural means which man can and must use to reach his destined end. Society is for man and not *vice versa*. This must not be understood in the sense of liberalistic individualism, which subordinates society to the selfish use of the individual.

Lastly, on September 14, 1952, Pius XII declared that: “All things considered, man in **his personal being** was not subordinated to the use of society, by that, on the contrary, community was made for man.” This must be understood in the light of the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*: “If we look to its ultimate usefulness, every moral association of men is in the end directed to the advancement of all in general and of each single member in particular; for they are persons.”⁹

Another text of Pius XII expresses the same thought: “Far from being an object and, as it were, a passive element in social life, man “on the contrary, is and must remain **the subject, the foundation, and the end** of it.”¹⁰

This text was selected for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and for its abridged version or *Compendium* in order to justify what this document calls the “**personalistic principle**.”

Where did this deviation come from?

If Leo XIII was driven to it by political concerns for conciliation, nevertheless it does have an origin dating back to non-Thomistic theologians: “It is a hackneyed phrase to place the theologians of the 16th century – Vitoria, Suarez – among the founding fathers of the notion [...] of the **rights of man**.”¹¹

It would seem that after them, since Leo XIII, the Popes have failed to make a clearcut distinction between the primacy of the whole with respect to the individual in the natural order (Principle of Totality) and the primacy of the salvation of souls above everything else in the supernatural order. A priority imposed on the city itself, the “Catholic City” mentioned by St Pius X. Hence confusion increased between the natural and supernatural orders and a more and more marked support was given to the Personalist philosophy and consequently to the notion of the Rights of Man. Vatican II proclaimed loud and clear what Leo XIII would never have said, but may have given to understand.

Personalism arrived *a posteriori* as a philosophical “crutch” for the Rights of Man, which were, at the beginning, but the exaltation and the worship of man.

9 - Marcel DE CORTE, *De la justice*, pp. 76-77.

10 - Radio message, Christmas 1944 (December 24, 1944).

11 - J.M. AUBERT, cf. Arnaud DE LASSUS, above mentioned lecture, p. 4.