



AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM: THE SON OF CHRISTIANITY

Por Flavio Felice / Avenire

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In his article published on "Il Riformista" (May 25, 2011), Prof. Luciano Pellicani replies to the article written by Prof. Giuseppe Bedeschi, who reviewed his book: "Dalla Città sacra alla città secolare" (Rubbettino, 2011). Pellicani challenges the interpretation of Bedeschi, under which: "History tells us that the first great theory, expressed in the modern world, the inviolable and inalienable rights of the person, has been developed by a profound Christian thinker, John Locke," and at the same time he reiterates his argument that liberalism (as a theory of political institutions) and Christianity were irreconcilable, and concluded that the reference to Christian roots of American constitutionalism would be the result of a "big misunderstanding." The arguments used by Pellicani are strong and show culture and enviable knowledge, but at the same time they detect a targeted selection of sources.

Other sources, equally authoritative, show that it is impossible to explain the genesis and development of liberal political theory and of American nation outside of the Christian tradition, reducing the story to the constitutional triumph of individualism and voluntarism interpreted in an atheistic way.

With particular reference to American historical events, the Jesuit counciliar father John Courtney Murray argued that, for inexplicable irony of history, the traditional Catholic doctrine of natural law gradually decayed in European countries, just as it took particular force in the new Republic across the Atlantic. This is the reason that, for Tocqueville, the participation of Catholics in the American experiment was immediately wide, free and without reservation. The contents of that experiment, in terms of ethics and political principles, had their roots in the doctrine of natural law: "We Hold These Truths".

With so many different authoritative and legitimate interpretations, of the same phenomenon, I invite Pellicani to wonder how first-generation Americans, that generation of the founding fathers, saw the propositions implicit and explicit in the Declaration of Independence. We read, for example, the speeches of George Washington, the letters written by John Adams, Noah Webster, Samuel Adams and many others, on the fundamental principles on which rests the nation. Please read also the Declaration on the Rights of the State of Virginia, the Constitutions of the new Commonwealth and of the States of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

The reading of these texts shows that, on many issues, we find the biblical tradition, the teachings of the ancient Greeks and Romans on the character and virtue, and the high-medieval vision of freedom and conscience, as elements that are rooted in the whole Christian concept of the human person.

The human person.

Pellicani denies that at the heart of the Christian tradition there is the concept of "person". It's necessary to say that "The Compendium" of Social Doctrine of the Church considers it as the first principle. I think the reason for the Pellicani's misunderstanding is here. According to the tradition of liberalism inspired to Catholicism- Rosmini, Manzoni, Sturzo and others, recalled recently by Benedict XVI in his letter to the President of Italian Republic Giorgio Napolitano (March 17, 2011)- liberalism is that because the person is elected as the end of associated life. This is a unique meeting point between classical liberalism and the liberal tradition inspired by Catholicism. A meeting point summarized by the following passage written by the German economist Wilhelm Röpke: "Liberalism is not [...] in its essence abandonment of Christianity, but its legitimate spiritual son". Then the fact that sometimes children and grandchildren are not grateful is another story.

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