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***Dignitatis humanae*: The Catholic Church's Path to Political Security**

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DIGNITATIS HUMANAE:
THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S PATH TO POLITICAL SECURITY

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Abstract: The Catholic Church has always had a complicated relationship with the political states in which it operates. While much of the Church’s history has shown that the institutional Church’s power relative to the state fluctuates as it has sought to retain political autonomy, it was in the centuries after the Enlightenment in which the most serious threats to the Church’s temporal security began to arise. Considering these alarming trends, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) revisited the Church’s relationship with the state in an attempt to secure the Church’s political security in the twentieth century and beyond. Primarily focused on the right to religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae*’s authors construct an argument based upon individual claims to religious liberty that ultimately allows the Church to confer upon itself similar protections. Though *Dignitatis humanae* cedes political authority, it reasserts the Church’s primacy in religious considerations, as well as the disparate judgmental capacities of religious and secular authorities. In concluding, this article will argue that *Dignitatis humanae*’s significance is two-fold: (1) the Church relinquishes claims to secular governing authority, but (2) elevates its true source of political protection—its individual members—to the forefront of its concern.

Introduction

In response to questioning from the council of Hebrew elders about his preaching of the Gospel, Saint Peter noted: “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.”² Although many passages from Holy Scripture indicate a critical start to the relationship between the Catholic Church and the states in which it operates, Peter’s observation demonstrates that the early, politically impotent Church began with an understanding that its Savior was crucified by the edict of a state government.

If the Crucifixion represented the low-point of the Church’s political prowess, its zenith came three hundred years later when Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and

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² Acts 5:29-30 (NSRV).

subsequent establishment of the faith marked Christianity's most explicit unification with and influence over civil institutions. That peak would be short-lived, however, as the Roman Empire soon splintered and the Church seized under internal divisions—once more throwing its political prowess into question.³ Indeed, only Constantine's famed donation allowed the institutional Church to establish the Papal States as a stable center of temporal autonomy from which to govern. Nevertheless, the Church's political influence beyond its territorial borders ebbed and flowed from the third through the seventeenth centuries. Ideas promoted by thinkers like John Locke and Voltaire further jeopardized the Church's secular position by seeking to entirely divorce religion from earthly governance.

The jarring events of the early eighteenth century forced the Church to come to terms with the implications of separating church and state. The French Revolution demonstrated how radical, unfettered state secularization could challenge the Church's privileges and authority among temporal states and profoundly endanger the clergy. Spurred by these alarming trends, the institutional Church reacted to the Enlightenment by supporting a conservative political order which explicitly opposed nascent liberal regimes. These efforts did little to stem the tide of liberalism though. Acknowledging the futility of its efforts, the Church turned instead to the ever-shrinking Papal States, negotiating with encroaching civil governments in an attempt to ensure the Church's longevity.

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops responded to the ever-popularizing trends of national secularization and codification of church-state divisions, seeking to secure the Church's political status in a new world order. *Dignitatis humanae*, building upon concepts set forth in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), asserts that religious freedom is innate to the human condition. This concept established the principle around which the Church exhorted civil governments to organize themselves. Assured by the Church's ultimate eschatological authority, the Council ceded political power in order to secure the respect and cooperation of states.

³ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 47. First published 2002 by Yale University Press.

Authority, Conscience, and the State

It is important to understand precisely why the Church identified religious freedom as having “its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature.”⁴ *Dignitatis humanae* recounts how societies around the world increasingly recognize “a sense of dignity of the human person” whereby “men should act on their own judgement, making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion.”⁵ That judgement, “impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek ... religious truth,” must contend with the reality of faith which necessitates “a personal assent ... to adhere to it.”⁶ The faithful person must rely on “the true judgements of his conscience” to “seek the truth in matters religious,” but must also arrive at those truths without undue influence or coercion.⁷ Once a person’s faith is freely proclaimed, a religious individual can then “participate in the law” borne of “the truth that is unchanging”—namely, how to live in light of God’s commands.⁸

The Church’s hesitancy to completely rely upon the judgmental capacity of individuals stems from notions articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*. The Constitution exhorts Catholics to use their human reason to reach the most consequential truth—that which allows them to ultimately commune with God. However, individuals fallen from the sins of Adam and Eve may veer “astray [from the righteous path] through ignorance.”⁹ In short, men and women will inevitably judge wrong some times. Nevertheless, that wrong judgement does not destroy all hope of finding one’s way to God. Misjudgment rooted in a faithful attempt to do good, rather than in the “blinding ... habit of committing sin,” does not result in “losing ... dignity.” Rather, straying from what is right enhances the dignity men and women possess by enticing them to approach God in a “personal way,” “not by blind impulses or external

⁴ Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965) §2, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §1.

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §2, §3.

⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

⁹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium Et Spes*, (7 December 1965) §16, at The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

constraint.”¹⁰ Both the majesty and the danger of religious freedom lie in the deeply human process of employing the conscience to move towards God—the process of choosing incorrectly, and then boldly choosing again.

Although the Council acknowledged the importance of individual conscience, it too recognized that a proliferation of erroneous moral decision making could result in the rationalization of sin. In this case, civil governments would then need to restrict religious freedom to prevent the morally bankrupt from abusing religion to justify their contemptable behavior. This scenario would also allow the state to restrict the Church itself on the grounds that it authorizes the logic adopted by errant Christians.

To safeguard the discernment process that individuals undertake to know God, even against the possible encroachment of a state which might “act in an arbitrary fashion or in an unfair spirit of partisanship,” the Church leans on principles articulated in other conciliar documents, especially as they relate to ‘Tradition.’ To the first point, *Gaudium et Spes* makes plain the potential of fallible individuals choosing righteously through sufficient dedication and reason, given that they “carefully attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.”¹¹ Therefore, “only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness,” and thus individuals must be given the space and spiritual guidance to do so.¹² The responsibility of responding to and facilitating the discernment process falls upon the Church, making the Church integral to the faithful’s success. To the second point, *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, reiterates how the Apostles implored the faithful to “hold fast to the traditions they have learned by word of mouth,” a call made feasible only by the establishment of religious freedom sufficient to permit transcendent conversations between like-minded believers.¹³ The Church acknowledges its inability to serve its followers at every turn and provide every answer, but the Catholic Tradition demands the intergenerational sharing not only of institutional wisdom, but also of interpersonal wisdom.

Through the process by which “men explain to one another the truth they have discovered,” individual consciences might be bolstered and held accountable, affirmed by

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §17, §16.

¹¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §14.

¹² Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §17.

¹³ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei verbum*, (18 November 1965) §8, at the Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

the advice of faithful peers who have struggled and discerned properly.¹⁴ The Church acknowledges the possible shortcomings of religious freedom, but consistently asserts its necessity. This right is worth advocating for because it allows men to “act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their duties in community life” by “order[ing] their whole lives in accord with the demands of [religious] truth.”¹⁵

Religious Freedom from the Individual to the Community

Having established the rationale for religious freedom as an *individual* right, the Church then needed to secure protections for religious *communities* to ensure that Tradition might survive between generations. *Dignitatis humanae* envisions the religious community not as a superfluous association of men, but rather “as a requirement of the social nature both of man and of religion itself,” without which men could not actualize their beliefs.¹⁶ These communities primarily serve to “assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them in instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles.”¹⁷ The document further attributes the cause of community to the way in which “the social nature of man and the very nature of religion afford the foundation of the right of men freely to hold meetings and establish ... organizations under the impulse of their own religious sense.”¹⁸ Thus, *Dignitatis humanae* presents the religious community as inextricably linked to the individual experience and indelibly exempt “from coercion in matters religious,” insulating associations from the same corruptive forces that individuals are shielded from.¹⁹

In an attempt to encourage governments to accept this extension of religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae* asserts that “the common welfare in society consists in... those conditions of social life under which men enjoy the possibility of achieving their own perfection.”²⁰ Properly fostering these conditions would allow “society to profit from the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men’s faithfulness to God.”²¹

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §3.

¹⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §2.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §4.

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §6.

²¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §6.

Intended to assist men in finding their way to God and to help them retain their faith once converted, religious communities logically become integral to the state stability as they serve as bulwarks against social turmoil. Therefore, by making religious communities indispensable for the operation of the state, the Council is then able to pursue its ultimate goal: establishing the right to religious freedom for the Catholic Church in its entirety.

Separate Realms, Unequal Power: The Church's Right to Religious Freedom

Having defended the right to religious freedom for both individuals and communities, the final, most-pressing priority for *Dignitatis humanae* was to extend this right to the Church as a whole. This goal was informed both in the historical memory of the Church's relationship with the state and amidst the growing recognition that political autonomy was no longer a viable method of temporal security. In defending this argument, however, two problems were presented. The first was the practical dilemma of how to make the intellectual leap from an individual right to an institutionally-acquired protection. The second issue was more of a question: If the Catholic Church was to relinquish its claim to temporal authority, what consolation prize would be offered to the Church for giving up on a centuries-long goal of retaining political power?

The first obstacle to establishing religious freedom for the Church was resolved rather transparently: the Council directly claims that the Church has “freedom for herself in her character as a ... spiritual authority... [with a] divine mandate ... [and] as a society of men who have the right to live in society in accordance with the precepts of the Christian faith.”²² This line of reasoning is borrowed directly from *Gaudium et Spes* insofar as after discussing individuals, communities, and the world, the Church clarifies its active participation at each level of organization. From *Dignitatis humanae*'s affirmation of the Church's involvement at each level of societal organization, it naturally follows that the institution ought to be afforded the rights granted to religiously-affiliated entities. Therefore, the Church renders unto itself the very right it proclaimed to be true at the individual and communal levels.

Having relied on religious justifications up until this point, *Dignitatis humanae* then calls for the tenet of religious freedom “to be recognized as the right of all men and all

²² Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §13.

communities and sanctioned by constitutional law.”²³ The Church proffers its ultimate aim of altering state constitutions to vociferously defend individuals, communities, and the Catholic Church from “any effort to deter citizens from the profession of religion.”²⁴ Setting forth such a goal demonstrates the Church’s inability to contest political discrimination in states given how preemptive protections need only be established in instances wherein the potentially aggrieved parties would have no influence or recourse in cases of persecution.

In response to the question raised above, the architects of *Dignitatis humanae* turned to Holy Scripture. Though somewhat obscured in the footnotes of the document, the pseudo-triumphalist argument that the Council would offer renders settling for the right to religious freedom over direct political authority palatable so long as the Church’s claims to spiritual power, eschatological foresight, and soteriological veracity remain uncontested.

The Compromise: Abandoning Political Power, Reasserting Eschatological Clarity

While discussing how Christians can enjoy religious freedom while participating in temporal societies, the Council looks to the model of Christ and His Apostles. The Council was especially concerned with irreligious individuals or adherents of different faiths over whom the Church would have no dominion if it lost political power. Indeed, the Council point out that Christ did “denounce the unbelief of some who listened to Him, but He left vengeance to God in expectation of the day of judgement.”²⁵ Meant to allay Christian anxiety and action towards false or disbelievers, the passage from Holy Scripture referenced in *Dignitatis humanae* is instructive in attempting to understand why the Council would encourage inaction. The passage the Council relies upon is Mathew 11:20-24:

Then [Christ] began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent, ‘Woe to you Chorazin. Woe to you Bethsaida. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sido Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than you.’²⁶

²³ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §13.

²⁴ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §14.

²⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11.

This passage levels a distant threat. Perhaps the Catholic Church cannot restructure society to its liking at present, but its knowledge of and orientation towards God at least offers a chance at salvation regardless of state interference. The Church's ability to guide the faithful to salvation is contrasted with Christ's condemnation of entire cities for their misalignment with God's commandments. The tension between church and state thus shifts from the Church contesting political power as a means of protecting its mission to an imbalance of eschatological power wherein earthy authorities can never compete against "flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."²⁷ This is the Church's triumph and supreme solace: its faith is of more consequence than any temporal punishment a state could inflict. In fact, the sentence before the 2 Thessalonians excerpt in the document cites provides further insight into the Council's perspective: "For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us."²⁸ There is an innate insecurity with which the Church broaches the topic of religious freedom, and rightfully so; depending on others to secure its future leaves the institution inherently susceptible to the whims of others.

The right to religious freedom for the individual, the community, and the Church can be obtained only through the permission of the state, making its conferral contingent upon a magnanimous government. Yet infringing upon religious freedom subjects the state to divine judgement—likely with an unfavorable outcome. Assured by this belief, the Council can make peace with ceding political authority. The Council's 'deal' retains the ultimate prize of communion with God, letting slip only an ephemeral benefit that would make the Church's work easier.

Conclusion: Power Derived from the Flock

Dignitatis humanae establishes a relationship between the Church and temporal authorities in which "[t]he Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other."²⁹ The Church finds inspiration in Christ's

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also 2 Thessalonians: 1:8.

²⁸ 2 Thessalonians: 1:7.

²⁹ Vatican Council II, *Gadium et Spes*, §76.

example, knowing that Christ's "kingdom is not from this world."³⁰ This is exactly why the Church—in the era of Peter and in the present—need not hold any direct political authority. Indeed, Christ says, "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But, as it is, my kingdom is not here."³¹ The Church's pastoral charge does not inherently require political control. Though the path forward (i.e. without influence over the decisions of states) may prove difficult, the Church's reinvigoration through the internalization of Christ's wisdom seeks to advance its manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Arguably the most important element of *Dignitatis humanae* is its defense of the institutional Church's right to religious freedom, one which is predicated on the power of Christ's earthly flock. As discussed above, the Church's strategy of appropriating protections for itself relies upon its connection of human nature to religious freedom, which then supports the right of associative groups to come together for the purpose of forming religious communities. The foundation of the whole rationale rests upon the individual Catholic adherent who forms a constitutive part of the collective upon which the Church establishes itself as independent of state interference. Thus, the individual Catholic and his or her community must be the Church's principal focus.

Some sixty years after the conclusion of Vatican II, the Church has yet to completely actualize its commitment to the needs and concerns of its flock. Many issues—which have elicited cries from the flock for guidance and action—remain unresolved, calling into question the Church's effectiveness in focusing its attention on the faithful. Nevertheless, if the Church seeks to retain a free hand in the religious realm, it must make every effort to train its attention and energy upon the needs of the faithful. The Church's very survival depends on it.

³⁰ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also John 18:36.

³¹ Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, §11. See also John 18:36.

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