

“Expanding his earlier defense of Pope Francis from critics who consider the pope a theological and intellectual ‘lightweight,’ Massimo Borghesi leads us through a very readable analysis of the neoconservative, largely American, detractors of the magisterium of Francis. It is not too surprising that the first Latin American pope, who prefers the peripheries to the centers of power, would generate resistance from the defenders of capitalism and whose vision of the church as a field hospital for sinners would be rejected by traditionalists who overly identify the faith with its moral teachings. Borghesi describes how Bergoglio’s insistence on discernment charts an ecclesial course which rejects both extremes of fundamentalism and relativism.”

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at Fordham University

“This is an essential book as Borghesi does not write a history of the pontificate of Pope Francis, but a genealogy of a tradition: his most influential intellectual opponents on the Rome-Washington axis. Borghesi draws a picture of the ideological, ‘America first’, neoconservative, and turbo-capitalist deviations in the Catholic Church in the USA since the 1980s. He thus offers an indispensable contribution to understanding a broader season in the history of Catholicism that precedes Francis’s pontificate and probably will continue for a long time.”

—Massimo Faggioli, Professor of Historical Theology,  
Villanova University

“If you have ever wondered why opposition to Pope Francis, especially from the United States, is so intense, look no further—but bring a spare highlighter. Laying bare the ideological corruption and political ambition of the ‘theocons,’ Massimo Borghesi has given us a masterly account of Francis’s discernment of the church’s mission to the contemporary world, and the resentment of those it dethrones. Thrilling in its breadth and depth, beautifully translated, and crammed with insights, *Catholic Discordance* is the definitive analysis of the choices and tensions the church faces in a post-Christendom world.”

—Austen Ivereigh, author of *Wounded Shepherd* and co-author  
of Pope Francis’s *Let Us Dream*

# Catholic Discordance

*Neoconservatism vs.  
the Field Hospital Church  
of Pope Francis*

Massimo Borghesi

Translated by Barry Hudock



LITURGICAL PRESS  
ACADEMIC

Collegeville, Minnesota  
[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Originally published as *Francesco: La Chiesa tra ideologia teocon e  
“ospedale da campo”*

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Borghesi, Massimo, 1951– author. | Hudock, Barry, translator.

Title: Catholic discordance : neoconservatism vs. the field hospital church of  
Pope Francis / Massimo Borghesi ; translated by Barry Hudock.

Other titles: Francesco. English

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press Academic, [2021] | In-  
cludes index. | Summary: “An analysis of the origins of today’s Catholic  
neoconservative movement and its clash with the church that Francis un-  
derstands as a “field hospital” for a fragmented world”— Provided by pub-  
lisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021027533 (print) | LCCN 2021027534 (ebook) | ISBN  
9780814667354 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780814667361 (epub) | ISBN  
9780814667361 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Francis, Pope, 1936- | Church. | Catholic Church—History—  
21st century.

Classification: LCC BX1378.7 .B66713 2021 (print) | LCC BX1378.7 (ebook) |  
DDC 282—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021027533>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021027534>

*To the small group of friends  
with whom I've shared some great intellectual sparring in recent years:  
Lucio Brunelli, Rocco Buttiglione, Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour,  
Emilce Cuda, Rodrigo Guerra López, Austen Ivereigh,  
Alver Metalli, Andrea Monda, Andrea Torielli*



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# Introduction

## Beyond the Theological-Political Model: Pope Francis's "Mobile" Church

On the evening of Friday, March 27, 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic claimed dramatically higher numbers of victims with each passing day, a scene unfolded in Rome that millions of viewers around the world who watched via live broadcast will not soon forget: a pope standing by himself before an empty and rain-beaten St. Peter's Square, praying to God for all humanity.

The silence that surrounded him was surreal. Behind the pope stood the icon of Mary as the *Salus Populi Romani*—that is, the health, or salvation, of the Roman people—ordinarily housed in the great Basilica of St. Mary Major, and the wooden crucifix of San Marcello, which, according to tradition, saved the Romans during the plague of the sixteenth century. The pope implored the Lord not to abandon the world to fear. Addressing the world, he began:

“When evening had come” (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting

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the other. On this boat . . . are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.<sup>1</sup>

Images of the “lonely” pope standing in a deserted St. Peter’s Square circulated immediately around the world. More than any possible description, they made clear the tragedy of humanity bent low by the epidemic. As the Italian professor of political science Alessandro Campi wrote,

Images of Pope Francis celebrating Mass alone, in a dark, desolate, and rain-battered St. Peter’s Square, were broadcast everywhere. To some it seemed like the withdrawal of faith and organized religion from the world—a fact so unprecedented and grandiose as to exacerbate the universal bewilderment that held sway, and not only of believers. But in those images, which are indeed disconcerting, many have instead seen a message of hope, a powerful signal. In a world deeply touched by secularization, rendered almost spiritually sterile by it, and incapable of guaranteeing a peaceful pluralism of beliefs marked by a secular and enlightened tolerance, the solitary figure of the pontiff praying for the well-being of all has suggested more encouraging thoughts: on the one hand, the redemption of religious culture over secular culture (which, in the face of the ultimate drama of death, fails to offer any consolation); on the other, an invitation to community and sharing, addressed to the world and widely accepted by it, beyond the diversity of faiths and beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

The pope’s gesture was powerful and is surely, in terms of symbolism, one of the most significant moments of his pontificate, destined to remain etched in memory. Nonetheless, that solitude was given a totally different meaning by some commentators. These others saw the pope’s solitude in that moment as an expression of his distance from the church and from the world, the end of his pontificate, now devoid of momentum, his

1. Pope Francis, “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided over by Pope Francis,” March 27, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html). All URLs provided in this book were accessed in May 2021.

2. Alessandro Campi, “Nulla sarà come prima?,” introduction to Campi, ed., *Come la pandemia può cambiare la politica, l’economia, la comunicazione e le relazioni internazionali* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2020), 14.

utopian plan to reform the church interrupted. This was the interpretation offered with obvious satisfaction by the historian Roberto de Mattei, president of the Lepanto Foundation, managing editor of *Corrispondenza Romano*, and disciple of Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, the Brazilian traditionalist founder of the organization Tradition, Family and Property. “St. Peter’s Square,” de Mattei wrote, “was empty, and neither the television images of Pope Francis nor his books and interviews attract public interest anymore. The coronavirus is the *coup de grace* to his pontificate, already in crisis. Whatever the origin of the virus, this has been one of its main consequences. To use a metaphor, Francis’s pontificate seems to me clinically dead.”<sup>3</sup>

While this judgment is unsurprising coming from de Mattei, author of a popular anti-Vatican II book, perhaps more surprising is that of Alberto Melloni, a highly regarded church historian. In an August 2020 article titled “The Beginning of the End of Francis’s Pontificate,” Melloni wrote,

For Francis, the symbolic turning point was the dramatic icon of the *papa solus*, facing an empty world on the rainy evening during COVID-19. . . . With that display of his institutional solitude in March, the final phase of this papacy began, a phase that could last ten years or more; and in the eyes of history, it will make the resignation of Benedict XVI stand out even more. The final phase of a pontificate is not about the pope mattering less or losing power; it is simply the moment when the future of the church (and of the conclave) passes definitively to the invisible and global body of the church, which has not yet decided whether Francis’s apostolic vigor should become a Christian style or whether it is better to rest in mediocrity and nostalgia.<sup>4</sup>

The significant thing about Melloni’s article is that he never clearly states the reasons for the supposed decline. And yet they are intuitive, and they document the dissatisfaction of a certain progressive faction, both Catholic and secular, toward the pontificate. “A growing tension around the pontificate

3. Aldo Maria Valli, “‘Il pontificato di Francesco? Clinicamente estinto’: Intervista al professor Roberto de Mattei,” September 14, 2020, Aldo Maria Valli blog, <https://www.aldomariavalli.it/2020/09/14/il-pontificato-di-francesco-clinicamente-estinto-intervista-al-professor-roberto-de-mattei/>.

4. Alberto Melloni, “L’inizio della fine del papato di Francesco,” *Domani*, August 11, 2020.

has also surfaced,” writes Melloni, “which during the pandemic fluctuated on various points, even on the part of circles that had been sympathetic and people who had praised it, as if Francis not doing what they wanted quickly enough was the problem.”<sup>5</sup>

While the conservative and traditionalist wing has been unrelenting from the start in its opposition to Francis, the weakening of progressive support is more recent. That segment of the church has been disappointed by the limitations imposed by the pope on discussions during the meeting of the 2019 synod of bishops on the Amazon regarding the possibility of ordaining married men as priests, and on German bishops who are favorably disposed to the idea of ordaining women. Francis, in the view of some, has surrendered to traditionalists, and this is the unforgivable sin. In some way, even lay commentators like Massimo Franco and Marco Marzano lend support to this telling.

In his book *L'enigma Bergoglio: La parabola di un papato* (The Bergoglio enigma: the arc of a pontificate), Franco describes Francis as an “enigmatic pope,”<sup>6</sup> one who is “masterful in deconstructing a church already in crisis, probably less skilled in building another.”<sup>7</sup> Franco, too, points to the image of “St. Peter’s Square, deserted and battered by the rain in March.”<sup>8</sup> Commenting on Franco’s book, Marzano, author of *La Chiesa immobile: Francesco e la rivoluzione mancata*<sup>9</sup> (The immobile church: Francis and the failed revolution), calls into question his own earlier reading of the pontificate as an “immobile” church, stalled by its “Jesuitic” oscillation between tradition and reform. Marzano sees in this no strategy on the part of the pope.

I, like others, have always imagined that all these apparently contradictory moves, the constant give and take, reflected a subtle, strategic design, an exquisitely Jesuitic political finesse to try to reconcile the irreconcilable and to establish consensus among the many factions into which the church is divided. Reading Massimo Franco’s beautiful book, *L'enigma Bergoglio*:

5. Melloni, “L’inizio della fine del papato di Francesco.”

6. Massimo Franco, *L'enigma Bergoglio: La parabola di un papato* (Milan: Solferino, 2020), 7.

7. Franco, *L'enigma Bergoglio*, 11.

8. Franco, *L'enigma Bergoglio*, 15.

9. Marco Marzano, *La Chiesa immobile: Francesco e la rivoluzione mancata* (Bari: Laterza, 2018).

*La parabola di un papato* (Solferino), prompted in me more than a few doubts about the validity of this view. By the time I finished, I had to admit to myself that that this style of proceeding, by advance and reverse, raising the hopes of the advocates of reform and then blatantly disappointing them, might be, rather than the playing out of a shrewd strategy, simply the result of total absence of a strategy, a groping forward by a man who unexpectedly became pope at almost eighty years of age, probably without any plan for the reform of the church and uncertain and stammering not only on the “great theological-political issues,” but also on the way in which to manage the day to day business of the church. This is what emerges with clarity in the eleven dense chapters of Franco’s book.<sup>10</sup>

For Marzano, then, Francis is a pope without a plan for reform, a conservative beneath the patina of progressivism imagined by the media.<sup>11</sup> But Marzano’s fluctuations and retractions on the papal “strategy” and Franco’s hesitations about the “enigmatic pope” highlight how completely both men fail to understand Bergoglio’s thought and intellectual formation, which is essential in being able to grasp the “reforming” plan of this Latin American pope.

In an effort to fill in the gap, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, editor-in-chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, offered a long article in September 2020 titled “Francis’ Government: What Is the Driving Force of His Pontificate?” Here Spadaro offered a clear answer to the questions raised by Melloni.<sup>12</sup> His intended audience is primarily the pope’s left-wing critics, those who

10. Marco Marzano, “Il Papa resta un enigma: dopo gli annunci, dolorose retromarcie,” *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, November 15, 2020.

11. On the “immobile Pope” imagined by Marzano, see also the observations of Iacopo Scaramuzzi: “And even on the opposite front, that of the reformists—or progressives or conciliarists, if you prefer—the more gradualist proposals are dismissed by radical criticisms of the Jesuit pope—in Italy see the book by Marco Marzano, *La Chiesa immobile*—which, from the abolition of compulsory celibacy to the ordination of women, from the election of the parish priest to democratic synodal procedures, are inspired more by the ideas of revolution than by those of reform, ignore the prospect of a new Western schism, and devalue every step forward, small or large, made by this pope, dreaming of a Vatican Council III as if it were the storming of the Bastille.” Iacopo Scaramuzzi, “Papa Francesco e l’opposizione ‘americana,’” *Gli Asini*, October 20, 2019.

12. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, “Francis’ Government: What is the driving force of his pontificate?,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/francis-government-what-is-the-driving-force-of-his-pontificate/>.

imagine an ideology of change, on the part of Francis, that does not in fact exist. Spadaro writes:

The reform would be an ideology with a vaguely zealous character. And yes, like all ideologies it would have to be feared by those who do not support it. It would be at the mercy of the disillusionment of those who have their own agenda in mind. The reform that Francis has in mind works if “emptied” of such worldly reasoning. It is the opposite of the ideology of change. The driving force of the pontificate is not the ability to do things or to institutionalize change always and in every case, but to discern times and moments of an emptying so that the mission lets Christ be seen more clearly. It is discernment itself that is the systematic structure of reform, which takes the shape of an institutional order.<sup>13</sup>

Spadaro insists, “The question ‘What is the program of Pope Francis?’ actually makes no sense. The pope has neither pre-packaged ideas to apply to reality, nor an ideological plan of ready-to-wear reforms, but he advances on the basis of a spiritual experience and prayer that he shares step by step in dialogue, in consultation, in a concrete response to the vulnerable human situation. Francis creates the structural conditions for a real and open dialogue, not pre-packaged and strategically studied.”<sup>14</sup> In the road followed by Francis,

there is no theoretical road map; the path is opened by walking. Therefore, his “project” is, in reality, a lived spiritual experience, which takes shape in stages and is translated into concrete terms, into action. It is not a plan that refers to ideas and concepts that he aspires to realize, but an experience that refers to “times, places and people,” to use a typical Ignatian expression; therefore, not to ideological abstractions, to a theoretical look at things. So that inner vision does not impose itself on history, trying to organize it according to its own framework, but it dialogues with reality, it is part of the history—sometimes marshy or muddy—of people and the Church, it takes place in time.<sup>15</sup>

The response that Fr. Spadaro, who knows Francis’s thinking better than almost anyone, offers Melloni, then, is to point to the spirit of dis-

13. Spadaro, “Francis’ Government.”

14. Spadaro, “Francis’ Government.”

15. Spadaro, “Francis’ Government.”

cernment and “open thinking” that are characteristic of the pope’s methodology. The mistake that Melloni and others make is to have imagined a “reforming” pontificate with a predetermined plan, something that is far from the actual reality of Pope Francis.

Spadaro’s article received its own critical analysis from the *Il Foglio* Vatican correspondent Matteo Matzuzzi. “True enough,” Matzuzzi wrote. “But the first person to suggest that there is a program driving this pontificate was the pope himself, in section 21 of his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. . . . In short, there was and there is a program, and it is not a matter of prioritizing a sort of ‘opposition between spiritual, pastoral, and structural conversion’; all of these things go hand in hand.”<sup>16</sup> In making this point, Matzuzzi’s intention is to point to the failures of the “program,” as his article’s title, “The Decline of a Papacy,” suggests.

And he is not alone. Also in *Il Foglio*, a daily Italian paper with a left-leaning Catholic slant, Daniele Menozzi, a student of Giuseppe Alberigo, seems unpersuaded by Spadaro’s arguments:

The article by [Spadaro] fails to dispel the doubt. Doesn’t the very fact that a question is being asked about the driving force of the pontificate represent the rhetorical expression of a basic uncertainty about the measures adopted by the pope? This doubt is reinforced if we look at the answer from the point of view of ecclesiastical politics. Spadaro argues that Bergoglio’s reformist line allows him to avoid the pitfalls of the double demands of progressives and conservatives. It is a claim of centrality made with difficulty by someone who claims to hold confidently the bridle of innovation.<sup>17</sup>

And so Menozzi, Melloni, and Matzuzzi all describe a pontificate blocked by indecision and an inadequate understanding of people, one that has, in terms of ideas, reached its endpoint. We can expect nothing new from it. The same doubts are expressed by Aldo Cazzullo in a *Corriere della Sera* article titled “Is There a Cardinal in Paris? Doubts about a Pope Who Remains Great.”<sup>18</sup>

16. Matteo Matzuzzi, “Il tramonto di un papato,” *Il Foglio*, September 16, 2020.

17. Daniele Menozzi, “Il dubbio che resta dopo aver letto l’analisi di Spadaro sul governo del Papa,” *Il Foglio*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/chiesa/2020/09/18/news/il-dubbio-che-resta-dopo-aver-letto-l-analisi-di-spadaro-sul-governo-del-papa-1072649/>.

18. Aldo Cazzullo, “C’è un cardinale a Parigi? Dubbi su un Papa che resta grande,” *Corriere della Sera*, October 9, 2020.

Between August and October 2020, then, commentators from opposing ideological sides seemed to be in agreement that Francis's pontificate had reached its end. It's a suspicious harmony that inevitably prompts the question: Why? Why now, faced with the spectacle of an empty St. Peter's Square where the pope's "solitude" proved capable of embracing the whole world, do commentators of both left and right decree the end? The reasons they offer are different and even contradictory. Where some see a slavery to tradition, others see only the hesitation of a progressive who is afraid of losing consensus. Yet these reasons are insufficient to demonstrate the decline of a pope who continues to demonstrate a sound grasp of the reality around him, clear judgment, and a determination to reform.<sup>19</sup>

But there is more to the question, and it had to do, in autumn 2020, with *an unacknowledged certainty of the reelection of Donald Trump as president of the United States*. His defeat by Joe Biden in the November 3 election seemed unlikely. This "intuition" probably explains the widespread perception that, with the anticipated second Trump term, Bergoglio's star was falling. In the four years of his mandate, Trump had in fact represented, in the eyes of millions of Catholics in the United States and abroad, a sort of anti-Francis. For this reason, the idea of another four years of his presidency seemed likely to mean the pope's oblivion.<sup>20</sup>

This was possible because many Catholics saw Trump not only as a politician, welcome or not for his ideas, but a real *defensor fidei* and an alternative to the bishop of Rome. For large sections of the American church, the man residing in the White House was a new Constantine. In this way the figure of the US president—who, even before Trump held the role, occupied a prominent place in American civil religion—had become the central figure of a theological-political model that stood in opposition to the "Latin American" Catholicism of the bishop of Rome. Trump's "investiture" in this role, during the 2020 campaign season, came not through the action of a pope but by the hands of an "antipope," Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former papal nuncio to the United States

19. See Marco Politi, *Francesco: La peste, la rinascita* (Bari: Laterza, 2020).

20. This is the argument of Marco Tosatti, who in May 2020 noted the alignment of the major Italian newspapers to the Trump line and their distance from the pope. See "Elkann a Repubblica: Che significa per il Papa (e Scalfari . . .)?" *Stilum Curiae* blog, May 16, 2020, <https://www.marcotosatti.com/2020/05/16/elkann-a-repubblica-che-significa-per-il-papa-e-scalfari/>.



and Francis's main opponent on the traditionalist front, with many connections in the American church.

Viganò's two letters to President Trump—of June 7 and October 25, 2020—represent a unique and at times delusional example of the theological-political Manichaeism circulating in some segments of the church.<sup>21</sup> The first letter refers to two biblical alignments, “the children of light and the children of darkness,” the former embodied by Trump and the latter by the “deep state” and the globalist “deep church.” In the second letter, made public less than a week prior to the election and dated the Solemnity of Christ the King, the apocalyptic tone is even more intense. Trump is the Pauline *kathèkon*, the “power that restrains” the power of evil that finds its expression in the pope, whom Viganò portrays as a sort of Antichrist. The archbishop wrote,

In Sacred Scripture, Saint Paul speaks to us of “the one who opposes” the manifestation of the *mystery of iniquity*, the *kathèkon* (2 Thess 2:6-7). In the religious sphere, this obstacle to evil is the Church, and in particular the papacy; in the political sphere, it is those who impede the establishment of the New World Order.

As is now clear, the one who occupies the Chair of Peter has betrayed his role from the very beginning in order to defend and promote the globalist ideology, supporting the agenda of the deep church, who chose him from its ranks.

Mr. President, you have clearly stated that you want to defend the nation—*One Nation under God*, fundamental liberties, and non-negotiable values that are denied and fought against today. It is you, dear President, who are “the one who opposes” the deep state, the final assault of the children of darkness.

For this reason, it is necessary that all people of good will be persuaded of the epochal importance of the imminent election: not so much for the sake of this or that political program, but because of the general inspiration of your action that best embodies—in this particular historical context—

21. Carlo Maria Viganò, “Archbishop Viganò's powerful letter to President Trump: Eternal struggle between good and evil playing out right now,” LifeSite, June 6, 2020, <https://www.lifesitenews.com/opinion/archbishop-viganos-powerful-letter-to-president-trump-eternal-struggle-between-good-and-evil-playing-out-right-now>; Viganò, “Viganò warns Trump about ‘Great Reset’ plot to ‘subdue humanity,’ destroy freedom,” LifeSite, October 30, 2020, <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/abp-vigano-warns-trump-about-great-reset-plot-to-subdue-humanity-destroy-freedom>.

that world, our world, which they want to cancel by means of the lockdown. Your adversary is also our adversary: it is the Enemy of the human race, He who is “a murderer from the beginning” (Jn 8:44).

Around you are gathered with faith and courage those who consider you the final garrison against the world dictatorship. The alternative is to vote for a person who is manipulated by the deep state, gravely compromised by scandals and corruption, who will do to the United States what Jorge Mario Bergoglio is doing to the Church.<sup>22</sup>

Viganò, an antiglobalization reactionary and apocalyptic figure of the counterrevolution, is an extreme figure, like a character out of the novels of Umberto Eco and Dan Brown. With his public repudiation of the Second Vatican Council and his criticisms of Benedict XVI, he became another Archbishop Lefebvre, to the point of being useless even to the anti-Francis front.<sup>23</sup> But for two years—beginning in August 2018, when

22. Viganò, “Viganò warns Trump about ‘Great Reset’ plot.”

23. As Sandro Magister wrote in his blog:

Benedict XVI promoted him to apostolic nuncio in the United States in 2011. The meek theologian pope certainly could not have imagined, nine years ago, that Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò—who returned to private life in 2016 but has been anything but hidden—would today be blaming him for having “deceived” the whole Church into believing that the Second Vatican Council was immune to heresies and moreover should be interpreted in perfect continuity with true perennial doctrine.

But this is just the length to which Viganò has gone in recent days, capping off a relentless barrage of denunciations of Church heresies over the last few decades, with the root of it all being the Council, most recently in an exchange with Phil Lawler, editor of CatholicCulture.org.

Attention: not the Council interpreted badly, but the Council as such and en bloc. In his latest public statements, in fact, Viganò has rejected as too timid and vacuous even the claim of some to “correct” Vatican II here and there, in its texts which in his judgment are more blatantly heretical, such as the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious freedom. Because what must be done once and for all—he has demanded—is “to drop it ‘in toto’ and forget it,” naturally with the concomitant “expulsion from the sacred precinct” of all those Church authorities who, identified as guilty of the deception and “invited to amend,” have not changed their ways.

According to Viganò, what has distorted the Church ever since the Council is a sort of “universal religion whose first theoretician was Freemasonry” and whose political arm is that “completely out-of-control world government” pursued by the “nameless and faceless” powers that are now bending to their own interests even the coronavirus pandemic.

he published a dossier on the sex scandals of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick that accused Francis and other church leaders of covering up the affair—he adopted the role, incredibly, as the church’s powerful moral reformer, to the point of calling for the resignation of the pope.<sup>24</sup> The attention and respect that he has received from many American clergy and laity can be understood only within the ideological framework that permeates so much of American Catholicism, one of culture wars, end-time struggle—children of light versus children of darkness—and religious and political Manichaeism. Like any political-theological model, this one, too, receives its full strength and meaning only in the context of a debacle, a defeat—in this case, Trump’s. There is no doubt, in fact, that what French journalist Nicolas Senèze has called “the American schism” found in Trump a point of reference.<sup>25</sup> The defeat of the Republican president coincides, from this point of view, not with the advent of a new savior, the Democrat Joe Biden, but with the end of the illusion of the anti-Roman Constantine.

Melloni wrote in the aftermath of the November 2020 election:

There was a historically unprecedented dimension of Trumpism, and it was his attempt to divide the Catholic Church, to produce within Catholicism the schism that has long divided the Protestant world, where “evangelical”

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Last May 8, Cardinals Gerhard Müller and Joseph Zen Zekiun also carelessly affixed their signatures to an appeal by Viganò against this looming “New World Order”

And to a subsequent open letter from Viganò to Donald Trump—whom he invoked as a warrior of light against the power of darkness that acts both in the “deep state” and in the “deep Church”—the president of the United States replied enthusiastically, with a tweet that went viral. (Sandro Magister, “Archbishop Viganò on the Brink of Schism: The Unheeded Lesson of Benedict XVI,” Settimo Cielo blog, *L’Espresso*, June 29, 2020, <http://magister.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2020/06/29/archbishop-vigano-on-the-brink-of-schism-the-unheeded-lesson-of-benedict-xvi/>, English translation corrected slightly)

24. On Viganò, see Andrea Tornielli and Gianni Valente, *Il giorno del giudizio: Conflitti, guerre di potere, abusi e scandali. Cosa sta davvero succedendo nella Chiesa* (Milan: Piemme, 2018). The Vatican Secretariat of State responded to the accusations of Archbishop Viganò with the *Report on the Holy See’s Institutional Knowledge and Decision-making Related to Former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930 to 2017)*, published November 10, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources\\_rapporto-card-mccarrick\\_20201110\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_rapporto-card-mccarrick_20201110_en.pdf).

25. Nicolas Senèze, *Comment l’Amérique veut changer de pape* (Paris: Bayard, 2019).

churches are distinguished from the mainline churches of Lutheran tradition. The Trump administration wanted to create “Catholical” Catholicism in three ways: first by exploiting the resentment against Francis held by integralist traditionalists who welcomed the irresponsible and crazed pronouncements of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò; secondly, by financing a web of mercenary internet journalists, miserable self-styled Ratzingerians (though Ratzinger would have incinerated them with two citations), to create a digital white noise that in 0.57 seconds would provide 163 thousand hits on Google to anyone who searches “Pope Francis heretic”; and thirdly, by sending Steve Bannon to Rome as Trump’s apocrysiary, to establish a study center for admirers of nationalism and racism.<sup>26</sup>

Given all of this, the results of the 2020 election bear a significance that transcends the primary political meaning. This is a fact that did not escape the most attentive commentators. Among them, the journalist Maria Antonietta Calabrò rightly pointed out:

Over the weeks, the “Catholic” question for the Dems has remained under wraps. But it is not only because of Biden’s personal faith that his victory “frees” Pope Francis from a possible checkmate in the event of Trump’s victory.

For geopolitical reasons and for reasons “internal” to the Catholic Church, Biden’s win restores the Throne of the world to be in some way in sync with the Altar. This will in some ways avoid the strong tensions that arose at the end of Ratzinger’s pontificate with the election of Obama and in the years of Trump’s presidency with Francis.

Who can forget Steve Bannon’s nationalist initiatives [here in Italy]? His alliance with “conservative” cardinals (starting with Cardinal Burke) that gradually dissolved after he left the White House until his recent arrest for financial crimes related to the construction of the anti-immigrant wall with Mexico? His alliance in Italy with Matteo Salvini, the politician with the “My Pope Is Benedict” t-shirt?

The Catholic vote (twenty-six percent of the population) was decisive for Obama’s victories, but in recent years in the United States it has become increasingly polarized, because “moving” to the right for an American Catholic has also meant distancing oneself from the Francis pontificate.

For over two years, since August 2018, former nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò’s propaganda has hammered against the pope, whose res-

26. Alberto Melloni, “Così papa Francesco ha vinto le sue prime presidenziali Usa,” *Corriere della Sera*, November 14, 2020.

ignation he has repeatedly called for. Viganò has called for prayers for Trump's re-election and won public support from Trump himself. Meanwhile, at the end of September, in an unprecedented move, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused the Vatican of immorality for its diplomatic agreements with China regarding the choice of bishops.

With Biden's victory, this process is interrupted.<sup>27</sup>

This American "turning point" frees the pope from the weight of the emperor and indirectly creates more breathing space for his program, which appeared uncertain when the fate of the ballot boxes seemed to play in Trump's favor. However, it does not solve the problem of that conservative Catholic bloc, in many cases traditionalist, which has responded to the reality of an increasingly insecure world by entrenching itself in a defensive posture. As Massimo Faggioli writes:

The story of American Catholicism today is inseparable from the polarization of political identities, and the intense division within the American church is destined to continue. Biden's election buys valuable time while Francis is still pope, but the subversive dissent of Catholics funded by financial elites against Francis's evangelical radicalism and Biden's Catholicism will not disappear on inauguration day. The role of Archbishop Viganò, former apostolic nuncio to Washington, as the bard of Catholic Trumpism (publicly recognized by Trump himself) will at some point be assumed by someone else.<sup>28</sup>

The dissent, though weakened, remains. Removing it will require a variety of conditions, including an understanding of its nature and origins. In 2017, Fr. Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa tried to describe the phenomenon, pointing out its affinities with Protestant fundamentalism.<sup>29</sup> The reactions, including that of George Weigel, a leader of Catholic neoconservative

27. Maria Antonietta Calabrò, "Biden, cattolico adulto, libererà il Papa dalla morsa di Viganò e dei conservatori," *Huffington Post*, November 7, 2020.

28. Massimo Faggioli, "Il cattolico Biden non potrà sanare lo scisma morbido in atto negli Usa," *Huffington Post*, November 17, 2020. For the possible scenarios of the American church and President Biden, see Faggioli, *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States* (New York: Bayard, 2021).

29. Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, "Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/>.

thought, came quickly.<sup>30</sup> American Catholicism is distinctive and exists on a different wavelength from the Francis pontificate; indeed, it does not seem to have the antennas necessary to receive and understand it. *La Stampa* Vatican correspondent Iacopo Scaramuzzi has written,

The United States, once the chosen home for Italian, Irish, and Polish Catholic emigrants, has over time become the cradle of a peculiar brand of Catholicism, a faith that accentuates the moral dimension of Christianity at the expense of the prophetic dimension. It is intertwined with the capitalism that permeates the nation's culture, alongside a nationalist, racist, proselytist, homophobic, evangelical Protestantism. It is no coincidence that *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit journal very close to Pope Francis, warned of an "ecumenism of hatred"—almost a Christian jihadism—that unites the most traditionalist fringes of Catholicism and Protestantism. In the long years of John Paul II, then, with the glue of anti-communism, many bishops shifted to the right, embracing a relentless culture war, identifying the Catholic faith with the "pro-life" ideology or the rejection of gay marriage, and leaving in the background Vatican II's opening to society and modernity. Finally, in recent years, in parallel with the election of Donald Trump and the rebirth of old nationalist and racist impulses, a new extremism has gained strength. It is "a new medievalist fundamentalism" in conflict with the "old neoconservative school" for "supremacy within conservative American Catholicism," according to Massimo Faggioli, an Italian historian of Christianity transplanted to the United States. In short, an almost separate Catholicism has taken shape. Tolerated before Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected, it now exists in the odor of heresy. And it is ready for schism.<sup>31</sup>

According to Scaramuzzi,

Pope Francis did not provoke this clash within Catholicism; he simply brought it to light. Before him, the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) had instigated the detachment, on the right, of the Lefebvrian fault. The earthquake has now resumed because the Argentine pontiff returns to that

30. George Weigel, "Spadaro, Figueroa, and Questions of Competence," *Catholic World Report*, August 2, 2017. See also Samuel Gregg, "On That Strange, Disturbing, and Anti-American 'Civiltà Cattolica' Article," *Catholic World Report*, July 14, 2017. Gregg is research director of the Acton Institute.

31. Scaramuzzi, "Papa Francesco e l'opposizione 'americana.'"

council somewhat neglected by his predecessors, because he proclaims a Catholicism that is not understood primarily as a message about morality, that does not primarily aim at making proselytes among nonbelievers, at scolding the faithful about their sexual mores, at making political alliances in defense of “nonnegotiable values,” but opens the doors of the church to the irregular, to the distant. It dialogues with people of other faiths. It does not embrace modernity uncritically, but it does call the church to an attitude of nonbelligerence, and even porosity, toward it. It has allowed Christianity to evolve and, at the same time, to remain relevant, to fertilize the culture of its time without submitting to it. Jorge Mario Bergoglio tries to translate the Christian message into the cultural terms of humanity today, as the Jesuit missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did when they spread Catholicism in Latin America or in Japan and China.<sup>32</sup>

Why is the pope’s perspective not understood? Why is he dismissed as a modernist, a progressive, even a “heretic”? What has happened to contemporary Catholic thought that renders it no longer able to translate the message of the council in the present hour? In the case of US Catholicism, to understand the *coupure*, the “rupture,” one must start from the historic *Roe v. Wade* ruling, with which the Supreme Court of the United States, in 1973, legitimized the right to abortion, move from there to the reactions and transformations of American Catholicism during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1980–1989),<sup>33</sup> and, finally, understand the current of neoconservatism promoted by Catholic intellectuals such as Michael Novak, George Weigel, Richard Neuhaus, and Robert Sirico. The latter movement, starting from the 1990s, became hegemonic in the American Catholic world, to the point of defining the two pillars of a new *Weltanschauung*: full reconciliation between Catholicism and capitalism,

32. Scaramuzzi, “Papa Francesco e l’opposizione ‘americana.’”

33. On the changes in the American church in the period from the 1960s through the Obama presidency, see the series of articles published by *Il Regno* in 2010 under the title “USA: dal ‘common ground’ al Tea Party” (pp. 559–75) with the contributions of James M. O’Toole (“Riforma e reazione: le strade dei cattolici americani,” pp. 559–63), John T. McGreevy (“I cattolici nella vita politica: Un ruolo ridotto,” pp. 564–69), Kathleen Sprows Cummings (“Stati Uniti, Chiesa e società: Le donne sono cambiate,” pp. 569–73), Massimo Faggioli (“Dall’America del ‘common ground’ a quella del Tea Party: Andata e ritorno,” pp. 574–75). A similar and more detailed account is offered in English in Steven P. Millies, *Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters’ Road from Roe to Trump* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018).

and culture wars that take morality as their battleground. The result was a strident Catho-capitalism, a new form of “Catholic Americanism” that sought a full interpenetration of faith and the American ethos.<sup>34</sup> To a degree rarely seen, politics shaped religion. As theologian and historian Jean-François Colosimo has written,

This political change is also theological. On a foundation of Thomist-naturalism translated into the terms of contemporary bioethics, morality increasingly conditions the dogmatic and spiritual discourse of Catholicism in the United States. At the same time, due to the influence that American cardinals have exercised in the Vatican since the election of John Paul II, Catholic social teaching has been given an undeniable liberal slant, thanks in large part to the human rights philosopher and pro-life militant George Weigel.<sup>35</sup>

This shift became more radicalized, in the form of a militant Manichaeism, after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars of the West against Islamic countries, which were aggressively supported by leading Catholic neoconservative thinkers despite the strong objections of Pope John Paul II himself. Questions of war and economy divide

34. “What happened in the last couple of decades is a certain degree of ‘Americanization’ of world Catholicism: in a sense, 9/11 and what happened since then made us (including non-American Catholics) all neo-Durkheimian, whether we like it or not. But there also undeniably appeared a new, early twenty-first-century Catholic Americanism. . . . What emerges after the 1980s is a new Catholic Americanism different from the one condemned by Leo XIII in 1899, especially considering that a liberal-progressive Catholic Americanism exists side-by-side with and yet opposed to a traditionalist-conservative Catholic Americanism.” Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 64, 113.

35. Jean-François Colosimo, *Dieu est américain: De la théodémocratie aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2006). [Translator’s note: American readers should note that the word *liberal* is used here and frequently throughout this book—and throughout the Western world outside the United States—with a meaning that is rather different than the way it is commonly used in the context of contemporary US politics. Since the root of the word’s meaning is freedom (Latin: *liber* = “free”), free market capitalism is often referred to as “liberalism” and its advocates as “liberals.” Thus the word *liberal* is not at all, in this context, the opposite of *conservative*, and a person or idea that would often be called “conservative” in the United States would in certain ways be considered “liberal” in Europe. *Leftist* is the word often used in Europe to describe what Americans often mean when they use *liberal*.]



the popes from the Catholic neoconservatives (sometimes referred to with the shorthand term “theocons”), though the former have maintained with the latter a general sense of cooperation. The neoconservatives have succeeded in bringing about a real metamorphosis of Catholic culture, moving it from a sense of mission and openness to dialogue to antagonistic and preoccupied with identity, from socially conscious to efficient and entrepreneurial, from communitarian to individualistic and bureaucratic, from seeking peace to supporting war, from catholic and universalist to Westernist.

This transformation, which became starkly clear after September 11, is described well by the astute Vatican analyst Lucio Brunelli:

A new kind of Christian is wandering around Europe. They are the *Christianists*. There are various versions, some wearing a cassock, others a jacket and tie. There is the aristocratic version and the disheveled one. But all Christianists have in common a combative sense of their Catholicism. Enough ecumenical chatter, they say; a strong identity is needed. They feel like they are a minority. In politics they are with the center-right. In economics they are ultra-liberal. Internationally, fervent Americanists. And so far, none of this is very remarkable. But the real novelty of the Christianists is not the sides they choose. It is the *pathos* they bring. The spirit of militancy. And above all, the strong ideological-religious motivation. A belligerent attitude toward Islam undoubtedly derives from the theology of the uniqueness of Christ the Savior. From the orthodox critique of Pelagianism comes the contemptuous accusation against Christians who dedicate themselves mainly to social initiatives that seek to protect and support “the least ones.” From the denunciation of theological irenicism, we arrive at the enthusiasm—not merely approval, but *enthusiasm*—for the allied military expeditions. All these characteristics are the essence of the perfect Christianist. A new phenomenon, no doubt, at least in recent years. In the minority, but not to the extent they suggest, because their positions are reflected in the doctrinal and political tendencies of some sectors of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The real point of distinction of the Christianists is not their differing political views; it is their use of Christianity as an ideological banner.<sup>36</sup>

36. Lucio Brunelli, “Cattolici e guerra: una nuova seta: Ecco i cristianisti,” *Vita*, October 26, 2001. Already in 1992 Brunelli had referred to “the stars-and-stripes trinity,” the Catholic neoconservative trio of the “Father” (Michael Novak), “Son” (George Weigel), and “Holy Spirit” (Richard John Neuhaus) (“La Trinità a Stelle e Strisce,” *Il Sabato*, June 13, 1992).

Brunelli cleverly adopted the distinction between Christians and “Christianists” that the French philosopher Rémi Brague had introduced in his 1992 book *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*. There Brague wrote:

In the religious domain, faith does not produce its effects except where it remains faith, and not calculation. The civilization of Christian Europe has been constructed by people for whom the end was not at all to construct a “Christian civilization,” but to make the most of the consequences of their faith in Christ. We owe it to people who believe in Christ, not to people who believe in Christianity. These people were Christians, and not what one might call “Christianists.” A good example of this is furnished by Pope Gregory the Great. His reform laid the foundations for the European Middle Ages. Now, he believed that the end of the world was very near, an end that to his mind would remove the space in which any “Christian civilization” might establish itself. What he constructed, and what would last a good millennium, was in his eyes only an entirely provisional marching order, a way of setting in order a house one was soon going to leave. Inversely, those who propose as the primary end of their actions the ‘saving of the Christian West’ have to be careful not to deploy practices that, as we have had examples of, are located outside of what Christian ethics, not to mention the most elementary common moral order, authorizes.<sup>37</sup>

With the category of “Christianist,” Brague brought into focus the new version of “Western” Christianity that was taking hold in America and Europe. The Christianist embraced the religious neoconservatism imported from the United States—a Christian who was self-conscious of Christian identity, self-referential, Westernist, preoccupied with morality, politicized.

In an important 2004 interview with the magazine *30 Days*, Brague returned to the distinction between “Christians” and “Christianists.”<sup>38</sup> He clarified the difference by noting several distinctive points of the religious neoconservative position.

37. Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 143–44 [English translation slightly corrected]. On the thought of Brague, see Serena Meattini, *L’Europa e la crisi del modern: Il pensiero di Rémi Brague* (Rome: Studium, 2019).

38. Gianni Valente, “Christians and Christianists” (interview with Rémi Brague), *30 Days* 10 (October 2004), [http://www.30giorni.it/articoli\\_id\\_5332\\_13.htm](http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_5332_13.htm).

A truly surprising judgment, reminiscent of the Protestant Hegel's assessment of Catholic countries. Offered in the context of the second half of the twentieth century, in light of the industrialized countries of the new Europe of 1982, Novak's reference to "still largely feudal societies of the Latin world" is anachronistic and beyond any logic. He is measuring the social doctrine of the church against some nonexistent Arcadia rather than the advanced industrial world. The anti-Roman and anti-Latin prejudice of the Anglo-Saxon world is clear.

Giovagnoli wrote,

These "anti-Roman" expressions reveal Novak's thought to be, more than anything else, very "American." It is reminiscent of the proud "Americanism" of the beginning of the century, widespread then among American Catholics, and even more of the powerful American Catholicism of the age of Pius XII, of which the most famous exponents, such as Spellman and Cushing, brought their demands even to Vatican II. Like those bishops, Novak too represents a typical form of adherence, above all empirical, to the American model of life. It is what could be defined as a "reconciliation" with Protestantism on an economic-political level, very different from an ecumenism of a religious nature, and one that does not imply an abandonment of rather conservative positions on the theological level. In the controversy against the Latin American episcopates for their critical positions toward the United States, Novak is clearly targeting a Latin-type Catholicism, more precisely Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Catholic Neoconservative Movement and *Centesimus Annus* as "Decisive Break"**

Giovagnoli's framing of the question—North American Catholicism versus "Latin" Catholicism—helps us grasp the nature of the ecclesial "heritage" that Francis, the South American pope, would face at the moment of his election: the American (United States) model that was imposed on Western Catholicism during the 1980s and 1990s. Thanks to its dominance, a theology of capitalism stood in distinction from and opposition to what remained of the theology of liberation; the church of the opulent world was profoundly detached from the church immersed in the reality of the poor. The Hegelian dialectic between lordship and

41. Giovagnoli, "Cattolicesimo e capitalismo," 18.

bondage existed *within* the church, giving rise to an intellectual contradiction between two incompatible points of view.

In this process, Novak was certainly not the only one to give shape to the Catholic Americanism whose strength lay in supporting the ascendant momentum of the Reagan moral-economic-political model. In addition to Novak, the Catholic neoconservative movement included Richard John Neuhaus, George Weigel, and Robert Sirico.<sup>42</sup> It was a very active group of intellectuals who, in the span of a few years, managed to establish

42. Richard John Neuhaus (1936–2009), a Lutheran pastor who became Catholic in 1991, was the founder of the Institute for Religion and Public Life, the Free Society Seminar based in Krakow, and the monthly journal *First Things*, a key publication of the Catholic conservative movement. His books include *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987); and *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

George Weigel, a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, was president and founder of the James Madison Foundation. He gained notoriety through his monumental biography, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999). Among his books are *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); *The Truth of Catholicism: Ten Controversies Explored* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001); *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); *God's Choice: Pope Benedict XVI and the Future of the Catholic Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010); and *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself and Challenged the Modern World to Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Robert A. Sirico is a priest and founder, in 1990, of the Acton Institute, a think tank based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that has as its purpose the promotion of the encounter between Catholicism and capitalism. His books include *Catholicism's Developing Social Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Acton Institute, 1992); *Defending the Free Market: The Moral Case for a Free Economy* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2012); and *A Moral Basis for Liberty* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Acton Institute).

On neoconservative Catholicism, see Weigel, "The Neoconservative Difference: A Proposal for the Renewal of Church and Society," in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Flavio Felice, *Prospettiva "Neocon": Capitalismo, democrazia, valori nel mondo unipolare* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2005); Felice, *Neocon e teocon: Il ruolo della religione nella vita pubblica statunitense* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2006); Francesco Martini, "Ritorno al Vangelo: la sfida dei Catholic neocons," *Limes*, April 12, 2013, <https://www.limesonline.com/i-neocons-vogliano-una-chiesa-samaritana/44918>.

themselves as the shapers of the American Catholic conscience. The group was part of a neoconservative galaxy dotted with intellectuals, disappointed by the left and by the politics of the Democratic Party, whose historical leader was the American Jewish journalist Irving Kristol.<sup>43</sup>

A school of thought slowly began to take shape and became the most incisive right-wing think tank starting in 1981, when Ronald Wilson Reagan's presidency began. Taking into account their backgrounds, the socialist Michael Harrington (1928–1989) ironically baptized these intellectuals as “neocons,” to distinguish them from the traditional conservatives led by Russell Kirk. In Italy, however, Kristol and his disciples were inadequately defined “theocon,” overlooking the fact that, as Novak attests, “Neocons were not in the beginning, nor are they now, distinguished primarily by religion or morals. The cutting issue was political economy and, in particular, dissatisfaction with the growing list of failures of the left-wing imagination.”<sup>44</sup>

Novak's observation about the genesis and ideology of the conservative movement in general is correct, though the movement's strong Jewish component calls for more nuanced consideration of the theological-political motivations involved.<sup>45</sup> It is also correct with regard to the genesis of his 1982 work on democratic capitalism, the motivations for which were dictated by a “secular” desire to break away from the traditional Catholic vision of the market and to reconcile with the modern

43. See Irving Kristol, *Neo-Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). See also Novak, “Twice Chosen: Irving Kristol as American,” in *The Neoconservative Imagination: Essays in Honor of Irving Kristol*, ed. Christopher DeMuth and William Kristol (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1995), 73–82.

44. Lorenzo Montanari and Luca Sandonà, “Nove domande a Michael Novak,” *Cultura & Identità* 4, March–April 2010, 24–25. Novak's observation is offered in “Neocons: Some Memories,” *National Review Online*, May 20, 2003, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2003/05/neocons-michael-novak/>.

45. See Jim Lobe and Adele Oliveri, eds., *I nuovi rivoluzionari: Il pensiero dei neoconservatori americani* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2003). On neoconservatism, see Dorrien, *The Neoconservative Mind*; Michael Gerson, ed., *The Essential Neoconservative Reader* (New York: Perseus, 1997); Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars* (Seattle: Madison, 1997); Christian Rocca, *Esportare l'America: La rivoluzione democratica dei neoconservatori* (Milan: I libri del Foglio, 2003); Alain Frachon and Daniel Vernet, *L'Amérique des néo-conservateurs: L'illusion messianique* (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2010); Gottfried, *The Vanishing Tradition*.

political economy. *Support for the capitalist system is at the origin of the conservative movement*, a meeting point between Jewish and Catholic authors, each having moved away from initially left-leaning stances. The religious elements of their thinking came later. These were not, in the beginning, decisive. In fact, Novak's prominence grew in relation to his identity as a "Catholic" philosopher. *He became a key figure because he defended, for the first time, the theoretical agreement between Catholicism and capitalism*, a stance that has, in a nation like the United States, inhabited by millions of Catholics, substantial political value.

His academic and political experience supported his mission. Since 1978, he had held the George Frederick Jewett Chair in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. He also taught at Harvard, Stanford, SUNY Old Westbury, Syracuse, and Notre Dame. He had headed the United Nations Commission on Human Rights since 1981 and served in 1986 as the head of the American delegation to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. But it was in the 1990s that Novak became a public figure. He received twenty-seven honorary degrees (including four in Latin America and three in Europe) and a bevy of prestigious awards and prizes, including the Anthony Fischer Prize (1992) from Margaret Thatcher, the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion (1994) in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace, and the Catholic Culture Medal from the School of Catholic Culture in Bassano del Grappa, Italy (1999). Like a kind of dual-faced Janus, Novak brought together in his thought two very distant subjects: the Austrian school of the liberal economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek and the social tradition of the Catholic Church. He wrote a book on von Hayek on the occasion of the centenary of his birth,<sup>46</sup> while his interest in von Mises, who emigrated to the United States in 1940, was rooted in his shared interest in the alliance between the church and capitalism that the Austrian economist set out in the final pages of his 1922 book, *Socialism*.<sup>47</sup> Novak credited von Mises's book *Anti-Capitalistic*

46. Novak, *The Legacy of Friedrich von Hayek* (Chicago: Liberty Fund and the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, 2005).

47. Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, trans. J. Kahane (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Indianapolis, 1981). In chapter 29 of the book, von Mises criticized both socialism and Christianity for their critique of capitalism, arguing that it was rooted, as for Nietzsche, in the *resentment* of the weak against the strong. "Jesus'

*Mentality* as being especially important in his intellectual formation.<sup>48</sup> It confirmed for Novak the magic formula of classical capitalism: “action in the interests of myself and action in the interest of others do not conflict, since the interests of individuals come together in the end.”<sup>49</sup>

Through Novak, the ethical-economic model of the Austrian school, adverse to welfare and solidarity in economic matters and colored by Nietzschean thought, came to be understood as normative for the Catholic vision of society. It is a mix of perspectives, highly casual from the intellectual point of view, that was accepted by the American Catholic establishment when Novak, supported by Weigel, Neuhaus, and Sirico, became the most authoritative interpreter, in the United States, of John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

Published just after the definitive collapse of Soviet Communism, the document was critical of capitalism. Celebrating the centenary of Leo XIII’s landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul insisted upon the earlier document’s continued relevance.

The content of the text [*Rerum Novarum*] is an excellent testimony to the continuity within the Church of the so-called “preferential option for the poor,” an option which I defined as a “special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity” [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42]. Pope Leo’s Encyc-

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words are full of resentment against the rich, and the Apostles are no meeker in this respect. The Rich Man is condemned because he is rich, the Beggar praised because he is poor. . . . Up to the time of modern socialism no movement against private property which has arisen in the Christian world has failed to seek authority in Jesus, the Apostles, and the Christian Fathers, not to mention those who, like Tolstoy, made the Gospel resentment against the rich the very heart and soul of their teaching. This is a case in which the Redeemer’s word bore evil seed” (379). In its opposition to wealth, economic freedom, and modern liberalism, von Mises said, Christianity, which is the true root of socialism, would have a destructive effect: “Liberalism . . . transformed the world more than Christianity had ever done. It restored humanity to the world and to life” (382). To avoid the crisis of the system, there is only one solution, and it is the same one proposed by the positivist Auguste Comte: an alliance between the church and capitalism, such as to modify the “dissolving” effects of Christian ethics. “Might not the Church reconcile itself with the social principle of free cooperation by the division of labor? Might not the very principle of Christian love be interpreted to this end?” (381).

48. Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, 27n24. See von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality* (South Holland, IL: Libertarian Press, 1972).

49. von Mises, *Socialism*, 357.

lical on the “condition of the workers” is thus an Encyclical on the poor and on the terrible conditions to which the new and often violent process of industrialization had reduced great multitudes of people. Today, in many parts of the world, similar processes of economic, social and political transformation are creating the same evils.

If Pope Leo XIII calls upon the State to remedy the condition of the poor in accordance with justice, he does so because of his timely awareness that the State has the duty of watching over the common good and of ensuring that every sector of social life, not excluding the economic one, contributes to achieving that good, while respecting the rightful autonomy of each sector.<sup>50</sup>

Already from these lines, the distance that separated Novak’s Catho-capitalism from John Paul II was obvious. In contravention of liberal dogma, the pope recognized the state’s “duty of watching over the common good” in the face of “the new and often violent process of industrialization.” This obviously did not mean a nationalization of the economy and society. Between statism and liberalism there is, however, a third way that the social doctrine of the Church has always proposed.

In this regard, *Rerum Novarum* points the way to just reforms which can restore dignity to work as the free activity of man. These reforms imply that society and the State will both assume responsibility, especially for protecting the worker from the nightmare of unemployment. Historically, this has happened in two converging ways: either through economic policies aimed at ensuring balanced growth and full employment, or through unemployment insurance and retraining programs capable of ensuring a smooth transfer of workers from crisis sectors to those in expansion.

Furthermore, society and the State must ensure wage levels adequate for the maintenance of the worker and his family, including a certain amount for savings. This requires a continuous effort to improve workers’ training and capability so that their work will be more skilled and productive, as well as careful controls and adequate legislative measures to block shameful forms of exploitation, especially to the disadvantage of the most vulnerable workers, of immigrants and of those on the margins of society. The role of trade unions in negotiating minimum salaries and working conditions is decisive in this area.

50. John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), 11.



Finally, “humane” working hours and adequate free time need to be guaranteed, as well as the right to express one’s own personality at the workplace without suffering any affront to one’s conscience or personal dignity. This is the place to mention once more the role of trade unions, not only in negotiating contracts, but also as “places” where workers can express themselves. They serve the development of an authentic culture of work and help workers to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment.

The State must contribute to the achievement of these goals both directly and indirectly. Indirectly and according to the *principle of subsidiarity*, by creating favorable conditions for the free exercise of economic activity, which will lead to abundant opportunities for employment and sources of wealth. Directly and according to the *principle of solidarity*, by defending the weakest, by placing certain limits on the autonomy of the parties who determine working conditions, and by ensuring in every case the necessary minimum support for the unemployed worker.<sup>51</sup>

The vision of the state and society proposed by the encyclical referred clearly to the welfare state, the model that Novak and the neoconservatives rejected. Equally opposed to their thinking was what John Paul II affirmed in the third chapter, titled “The Year 1989”: “The crisis of Marxism does not rid the world of the situations of injustice and oppression which Marxism itself exploited and on which it fed. To those who are searching today for a new and authentic theory and praxis of liberation, the Church offers not only her social doctrine and, in general, her teaching about the human person redeemed in Christ, but also her concrete commitment and material assistance in the struggle against marginalization and suffering.”<sup>52</sup> John Paul II, in other words, was hoping, after the fall of Communism, for the affirmation of an authentic theology of liberation, free from Marxism but no less committed to the struggle for justice. It was the same dream expressed by Methol Ferré and Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

In the fourth chapter of the document, on “Private Property and the Universal Destination of Material Goods,” the pope affirmed that “the Church teaches that the possession of material goods is not an absolute right,”<sup>53</sup> and here he referred to his encyclicals *Laborem Exercens* and *Sol-*

51. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 15.

52. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 26.

53. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 30.

*licitudo Rei Socialis* and to the historic conference of the Latin American church in Puebla in 1979. This was, to the Catholic neoconservatives, an utter heresy. It did not, of course, mean a blanket condemnation of the Western economic system. The pope recognized that “the modern *business economy* has positive aspects. Its basis is human freedom.”<sup>54</sup> This was the central truth proclaimed by the neoconservatives, but for John Paul this recognition was delimited by the role of the state, in the economy of the common good, in regulating the selfish instincts that dominate the logic of the market. The pope taught:

It is the task of the State to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the State had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the State and all of society have the duty of *defending those collective goods* which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual.

Here we find a new limit on the market: there are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic. There are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold. Certainly the mechanisms of the market offer secure advantages: they help to utilize resources better; they promote the exchange of products; above all they give central place to the person’s desires and preferences, which, in a contract, meet the desires and preferences of another person. Nevertheless, these mechanisms carry the risk of an “idolatry” of the market, an idolatry which ignores the existence of goods which by their nature are not and cannot be mere commodities.<sup>55</sup>

The “idolatry of the market” was an expression that, from the point of view of the Catholic neoconservatives, could not be uttered. Here John Paul II was violating the dogma behind Novak’s “doctrine of involuntary consequences,” whereby the market, by itself, by its own internal logic independent of the intentions of individuals, is able to reach, as Leibniz put it, a preestablished harmony. Economic theodicy has no foundation.

54. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 32.

55. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 40.

For this reason, John Paul said, “*it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called ‘Real Socialism’ leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization*”<sup>56</sup>—a statement directly contradicting the neoconservative gospel.

For the pope, overcoming Marxism required understanding its point of truth:

Marxism criticized capitalist bourgeois societies, blaming them for the commercialization and alienation of human existence. This rebuke is of course based on a mistaken and inadequate idea of alienation, derived solely from the sphere of relationships of production and ownership, that is, giving them a materialistic foundation and moreover denying the legitimacy and positive value of market relationships even in their own sphere. Marxism thus ends up by affirming that only in a collective society can alienation be eliminated. However, the historical experience of socialist countries has sadly demonstrated that collectivism does not do away with alienation but rather increases it, adding to it a lack of basic necessities and economic inefficiency.

The historical experience of the West, for its part, shows that even if the Marxist analysis and its foundation of alienation are false, nevertheless alienation—and the loss of the authentic meaning of life—is a reality in Western societies too. This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way. Alienation is found also in work, when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement, in which he is considered only a means and not an end.

The concept of alienation needs to be led back to the Christian vision of reality, by recognizing in alienation a reversal of means and ends.<sup>57</sup>

Communism’s foundation in “alienation” was, John Paul knew, reductive and mistaken. But its critique of the alienation that marked the capitalist world deserved attention. In contrast to Novak’s position, according

56. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 35 (emphasis mine).

57. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 41.

to which capitalism is the simple negation of Communism, John Paul II sought a way of moving forward that included critical consideration of this alienation in the post-Communist world. The pope reiterated this point two years later, in an interview with Jas Gawronski published in November of 1993. He said:

Communism has been successful in this century as a reaction to a certain kind of excessive, savage capitalism that we are all familiar with. We can refer here to the social encyclicals and above all to the first one, *Rerum Novarum*, in which Leo XIII describes the situation of the workers at that time. Even Marx described it in his own way. That was the social reality, there was no doubt, and it derived from the system, from the principles of ultraliberal capitalism. . . .

Of course, it was legitimate to fight the unjust totalitarian system, which called itself socialist or communist. But what Leo XIII says is also true—there are “seeds of truth” even in the socialist program. It is obvious that these seeds must not be destroyed, they must not be lost. Today we need a precise and objective confrontation, accompanied by a keen sense of discernment. Those who advocate capitalism to the bitter end and in any form tend to disregard even the good things achieved by Communism: the fight against unemployment, concern for the poor. In the system of real socialism, excessive protectionism of the State has also brought about negative fruits. Private initiative has disappeared, inertia and passivity have spread.<sup>58</sup>

The pope’s position, then, was clear: “*Those who advocate capitalism to the bitter end and in any form tend to disregard even the good things achieved by Communism: the fight against unemployment, concern for the poor.*” And *Centesimus Annus*, the encyclical that reflected on the world after the fall of the Berlin wall, did not indulge in any legitimation of victorious capitalism.

The pope would reiterate this in his 1999 apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*. There he wrote:

More and more, in many countries of America, a system known as “neoliberalism” prevails; based on a purely economic conception of man, this

58. Jas Gawronski, Interview with Pope John Paul II, *La Stampa*, November 2, 1993, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1993/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19931102\\_intervista.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1993/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19931102_intervista.html).

system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples. At times this system has become the ideological justification for certain attitudes and behavior in the social and political spheres leading to the neglect of the weaker members of society. Indeed, the poor are becoming ever more numerous, victims of specific policies and structures which are often unjust.<sup>59</sup>

The judgment was clear and could not be misunderstood. That is what is so surprising about the ease with which the Catholic neoconservatives took possession of *Centesimus Annus*, presenting it as the manifesto of American Catho-capitalism in the nineties. The result was that a text that strongly critical of neocapitalism came to be understood as an apologetics manual of the same. This hermeneutic violence had at its heart a single point, made in the document's paragraph 42, where the pope posed a question:

Returning now to the initial question: can it perhaps be said that, after the failure of Communism, capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism should be the goal of the countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society? Is this the model which ought to be proposed to the countries of the Third World which are searching for the path to true economic and civil progress?

The answer is obviously complex. If by "capitalism" is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property, and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a "business economy," "market economy," or simply "free economy." But if by "capitalism" is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.<sup>60</sup>

59. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (January 22, 1999), 56, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_22011999\\_ecclesia-in-america.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html).

60. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 42.

It was John Paul's subtle distinction between the two forms of capitalism—in which the acceptable one, according to the pope's own words, barely merits being called capitalism—that allowed the taking of the winter palace. With a clever coup, Novak and his fellow neoconservatives presented themselves as the proponents of a good, "ethical" capitalism as opposed to the bad. All the criticisms that the encyclical addressed to post-Marxist capitalism fell into oblivion, and only paragraph 42 remained. That was the opening they took to suggest the existence of a "break" by John Paul II with the entire tradition of Catholic social teaching, which had been marked from the start by a distrust of capitalism. *Centesimus Annus* had finally brought legitimacy to *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. Novak's work had anticipated and paved the way for the Polish pope's "turning point." This is the interpretation that was repeated countless times in the media and in all the necessary settings, the interpretation that became commonplace in Catholic publications of all kinds, first in the United States and then in Europe: *Centesimus Annus* has opened the doors to ethical Catho-capitalism.

Richard John Neuhaus wrote immediately following the release of the text:

*Centesimus Annus* is a ringing endorsement of the market economy. The endorsement is, however, joined to powerful challenges . . .

John Paul affirms a "new capitalism." But the term he prefers is simply "free economy." Of course socialism is economically disastrous, but what he calls the "evil" of the system imposed by the communist "empire" is the denial of freedom. Readers will miss the gravamen of this encyclical if they do not recognize that it is, first and most importantly, an argument about human nature. Capitalism is the economic corollary of the Christian understanding of man's nature and destiny . . .

The pope says that we can now see how prescient Leo XIII was in his scathing critique of the socialist idea 100 years ago. . . . According to the pope's argument, interpretations of Catholic social teaching along socialist or semi-socialist lines, together with the idea that the Church proposes a "third way" between capitalism and socialism, are in serious error . . .

The present encyclical must surely prompt a careful, and perhaps painful, re-thinking of conventional wisdoms about Catholic social teaching. It may be, for instance, that the controlling assumptions of the American Bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, must now be recognized as unrepresentative of the Church's authoritative teaching . . .

While the bulk of the 114 pages of the encyclical is devoted to economics, its import is to deflate the importance of the economic. Economics, politics, culture—these three define the social order, and the greatest of these is culture. And at the heart of culture is the spiritual and moral.<sup>61</sup>

Here Neuhaus fixed the canonical points of the neoconservative reading of *Centesimus Annus*: the pope affirms a new capitalism governed by a triple order—economic, political, and cultural. There is no “third way” between capitalism and socialism and, for this reason, the criticisms of the capitalist system offered by the United States bishops’ 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, do not represent the teaching of the magisterium in social matters.

In a 1993 interview, Neuhaus returned to the point. The “new capitalism” of *Centesimus Annus* “is in many ways what writers such as Michael Novak describe as democratic capitalism. It is an idea that is historically embodied in a number of advanced societies, not least of all the United States. This is a very significant development in Catholic social teaching that will, in my judgment, nurture a new phase of Catholic social thought with respect to the relationship between a Christian anthropology and a Christian understanding of history as it relates to economics and political justice.”<sup>62</sup>

And thus, the circle was closed. The content of *Centesimus Annus* was identical to that expressed by Novak in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. Novak was not only a good interpreter of the pope; he was also his precursor. Pope John Paul II was a “Novakian” without being aware of it. And Neuhaus’s statement was by no means isolated. Even Weigel, in a 2014 article, claimed:

From its inception with Pope Leo XIII in the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, modern Catholic social doctrine, for all its insights, had a somewhat abstract, top-down quality. Thus, the strikingly empirical character of *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II’s seminal 1991 encyclical on the free and virtuous society in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions, marked a significant development in the Church’s evolving social thought. The basic principles of that tradition remained in

61. Richard John Neuhaus, “The Pope Affirms the New Capitalism,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 1991, <https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-1-number-3/initial-reactions-centesimus-annus>.

62. Richard John Neuhaus, *Religion and Liberty*, September/October 1993, <https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-11-number-3/centesimus-annus-retrospective>.

place, but they now found themselves filled out by a far more attentive reading of the realities of late-modern political and economic life—including the one that Novak powerfully described at the outset of his groundbreaking 1982 book *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*: “Of all the systems of political economy which have shaped our history, none has so revolutionized ordinary expectations of human life—lengthened the life span, made the elimination of poverty and famine imaginable, enlarged the range of human choice—as democratic capitalism.” Recognizing the truth (and limits) of that insight, *Centesimus Annus* developed Catholic social doctrine’s “standpoint” to include the possibilities of empowerment latent in free economies, clearly reflecting Novak’s influence. If Catholic social doctrine continues to unfold along the trajectory of *Centesimus Annus*, it will continue to bear the imprint of Novak’s thought.<sup>63</sup>

The neoconservatives literally appropriated the pope. They made him the messenger of the gospel of Michael Novak. Like Novak, John Paul was an “innovator,” the pope who established the “break” with the whole social tradition of the church from Leo XIII onward.

This was Weigel’s blunt assertion in his preface to the 1992 anthology *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom*, a text whose purpose was to establish John Paul’s “liberal” vision in the United States: “*Centesimus Annus* thus marks a decisive break with the curious materialism that has characterized aspects of modern Catholic social teaching since Leo XIII.”<sup>64</sup>

The encyclical, we are to understand, establishes a break in Catholic social teaching’s inclination to see only the materialistic aspects of the liberal economy. By combining politics, culture, and economics in the same trinomial, *Centesimus Annus* is able to recognize the market economy’s “spiritual” nature.<sup>65</sup> This theologically established idealization of

63. George Weigel, “American and Catholic: Michael Novak’s Achievement,” *City Journal*, Winter 2014, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/american-and-catholic-13632.html>.

64. George Weigel, ed., *A New Worldly Order: John Paul II and Human Freedom: A ‘Centesimus Annus’ Reader* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 14. Weigel repeated the assertion in his *The Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 139.

65. Novak offered the same claims, writing that “in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* (1999), John Paul II described the ‘neoliberals’ as materialists concerned only with market processes, profits, and efficiency, to the detriment of the spirit, values, and human rights”—a vision that Novak disputed because today “even economics would seem, therefore, like physics and other sciences, to stand against materialism” (“Modernità della Dottrina sociale della Chiesa,” *Atlantide*, April 2006, 52, 53).



capitalism is at the heart of *A New Worldly Order*; its articles marshal all the evidence that the Catholic neoconservatives can offer. Among the book's contributors are Peter L. Berger, Milton Friedman, Richard John Neuhaus, Michael Novak, and Max L. Stackhouse, illustrious authors who shaped the Catholic conscience in America and beyond more effectively than the bishops, shaping a Catholic world increasingly right-leaning, in part in response to the ethical and relativist progressivism embraced by the Democratic Party.

The ideological manipulation of *Centesimus Annus* was accepted almost without question in the church, and 1991 marked a turning point in the process. Vatican journalist Sandro Magister described the situation in 1997:

For Neuhaus, Michael Novak, and George Weigel, the troika of American Catholic liberalism, it has been a crescendo of successes. In France, Jacques Garello and Jean Yves Naudet, from the University of Aix-Marseille, back them up. In Great Britain, Kenneth Minogue. In Italy, the theorists of Catholic liberalism—Dario Antiseri, Lorenzo Infantino, plus the minister Antonio Martino who studied with the Jesuits—are welcomed at Rome's Free International University of Social Studies, which is supported by Confindustria [the Italian confederation of industries]. Then there is Giovanni Palladino, president of the Don Luigi Sturzo International Center. And Don Angelo Tosato, professor of biblical sciences at the Gregorian, who was the first to introduce Novak's writings to Italy.

It is in the United States that the new current of Catholic liberals was born and runs strongest. A fierce platoon came to the symposium held in Rome by the Legionaries of Christ. In addition to Novak, there were Reverend Robert Sirico, Gregory Gronbacher, Jennifer Roback Morse, George Gilder, each with prestigious awards.

Sirico, the son of Neapolitans who emigrated to Michigan, founded the Lord Acton Institute in 1990 and is part of the very exclusive Mont Pélerin Society, which is the global Gotha of pure liberals. Gronbacher directs the Center of Economic Personalism in Grand Rapids. Roback teaches at George Mason University, Virginia, a stronghold of Public Choice theorists led by the Nobel Prize-winning economist James M. Buchanan. Gilder is a disciple of Henry Kissinger and a great futurologist of politics, as well as a devotee of Opus Dei. All are students of Milton Friedman and Gary Becker, the super-liberals of the famous Chicago school, but even more of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek, founders of that Austrian school of thought that now serves as the most natural link between Catholic doctrine and the modern free market.

The Catholic liberalists are so convinced of this conjunction that they make themselves apostles of it within the church. The Lord Acton Institute, founded by Father Sirico, even established in its statutes that its “primary purpose is to familiarize the religious community, especially students and seminarians, with the moral dimensions of the free market.”<sup>66</sup>

Magister’s article clearly captures the influence that these American neo-conservatives wielded in the 1990s within the Catholic world.<sup>67</sup> It was not just a vision of the economy but a true *Weltanschauung*, a vision of the world that corresponds to what we have called here “Catholic Americanism”—a vision that curiously follows that of the capitalistic Calvinism described by Max Weber.

*The Catholicization of capitalism represents, we can say, the formula for the Protestantization of Catholicism.* Faith is no longer expected to act as the leaven of the dough, a transformative force. More prosaically, it becomes the theological confirmation of a process that moves on its own feet. Novak’s economic theology leads, in its adialectical reaction to the theology of revolution, to the complete acceptance of the status quo. The logic of capitalism, its immanent theodicy, whereby, through a sort of miracle, the sum of all selfishness produces harmony and well-being, is lauded and magnified as the heart of the system. For this reason, any ethical-political surplus, celebrated “religiously,” always comes too late.

66. Sandro Magister, “I cattolici liberisti: Benedetta sia l’impresa,” *L’Espresso*, May 15, 1997.

67. In 1991 and 1992, Novak, Weigel, Neuhaus, together with the Polish Dominican Maciej Zieba, offered the first seminar in Liechtenstein for forty graduate students from Europe and North America. In 1994 the seminar moved to Krakow, Poland, and took as its point of reference the study of John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus*. The move east, to a former Soviet-dominated country, had a strategic value. Weigel recalled in 2018, “the ‘Centesimus Annus Seminar on the Free Society’ began meeting in Poland’s cultural and spiritual capital in July 1994—and has met there every summer since. Renamed the ‘Tertio Millennio Seminar on the Free Society’ in 2000, the seminar has graduated some 900 students; its 27th annual assembly this past July included young adults from the United States, Canada, Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Russia. . . . Now, my faculty colleagues and I can look back on more than a quarter-century of work that has helped form great priests and religious; parliamentarians and civil servants; journalists and academics; doctors and lawyers; successful businessmen and philanthropists; impressive marriages and families; and, most importantly, Catholics who live the joy of the Gospel as missionary disciples in many walks of life” (Weigel, “Full-Immersion Catholicism,” *First Things*, May 9, 2018).

The Catho-capitalist model is not opposed to secularization; on the contrary, like the theology of revolution, it is a clear expression of it.

### **David Schindler's Theological Critique of the Neoconservative Movement**

It was precisely a critique of the secularization of American society in the 1980s that served as a springboard for a strong challenge of neoconservative thought, offered on a rigorously theological level, by a highly regarded American Catholic theologian. In 1986, David L. Schindler was professor of fundamental theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family in Washington, coeditor of the journal *Communio*, and author of numerous books and essays. He was a leading exponent of the *Communio* school of theology, inspired by the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Ratzinger.

Schindler's challenge to the neoconservative movement was prompted by a response by George Weigel to an interview with Ratzinger in which the then-cardinal discussed the "bourgeois" character of America at the time.<sup>68</sup> In a *Crisis* magazine article, Weigel responded to Ratzinger's comments, objecting to the characterization and insisting upon the profoundly Christian soul of America.<sup>69</sup> He wrote:

In an interview this past April with Lucio Brunelli of the Italian Catholic magazine *30 Giorni*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger described dissent among

68. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Interview with Lucio Brunelli," *30 Days* (April 1986). Weigel's response is "Is America Bourgeois?," *Crisis*, October 1986, 5–10, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/1986/is-america-bourgeois>.

69. Reading Ratzinger's interview, one has, in fact, the impression that Weigel's reaction is not so much motivated by Ratzinger's judgment on "bourgeois Christianity," which only superficially affected America, as by the conclusion of the interview where he targets the opposing fundamentalisms, the Islamic and the North American. Ratzinger explained the Islamist position as a reaction to the Westernist one, typical of the technical-liberal civilization. Ratzinger said, "A hasty and overconfident industrialization had superimposed the models of liberal Western civilization on top of the profound religious values of the Islamic world. But when this process had produced a certain economic power of its own and new intellectual elites, the reaction had to arrive: the awareness of one's own history and culture turned against the claim of exclusivity of the technical and liberal civilization, whose cynicism about the dignity of God and of man arouses anger and aversion." This narrative surely displeased Weigel.

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