



The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy
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that the primary concern of the leadership and spokesmen of the church is the protection of the institutional interests of the church and that any political order that respects those interests, however manifestly unjust, will receive the cooperation, and often the support of the church. A third critical response holds that a church that is hierarchical and quasi-monarchic in structure is likely to promote—and has done so historically—attitudes and practices on the part of its adherents that favor authoritarianism in government. Finally, there is a fourth position that argues that the basic values of Christianity that have been taught by the church are such as to lead over time to a recognition of the moral and religious superiority of democratic government. The following discussion will attempt to evaluate these positions, and if I can communicate my own view at the outset, it will argue that all four have some historical basis but that the official teaching of the Catholic church has moved from the first to the fourth positions—that is, from indifference among forms of government that promote the common good, to support for democracy as morally superior and philosophically preferable.

Modern liberal constitutional democracy as we know it involving the actual or potential exercise of universal suffrage in periodic contested elections, the rule of law, and guarantees of individual rights only emerged in the late eighteenth century. It was especially associated with the American and French revolutions, although the earlier English constitutional experience exercised an important influence upon it. Forms of direct democracy had developed in Athens of the fifth century B.C., in the medieval communes and Italian city-states, and in the Swiss cantons, but “modern” democracy with its representative institutions, constitutional guarantees, and independent judiciaries was a relatively late development. In its Anglo-American form that development took place under primarily Protestant auspices, and did not require a response on the part of the Catholic church other than the hope for religious toleration. (I am aware that there was a short-lived Catholic experiment in Maryland, but its general significance was limited.) It was only when the democratic wave affected countries that were basically Catholic that the institutional church was required to make a doctrinal response. The nature and circumstances of that response fundamentally affected the relationship between Catholicism and democracy for a century and a half, and provided empirical evidence for those who maintain the first three theses listed above. Yet throughout the

