

St. Thomas Aquinas enters the U.S. election race

Forget Ayn Rand: don't Paul Ryan's policy ideas go back to the time of the ancient Greeks?

By C.S. Morrissey
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Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, Wis., has entered the fray over vice presidential contender Paul Ryan, who has been accused of holding philosophical opinions at odds with Church teaching.



"I know him very well. He is in regular communication with his bishop. I am defending his reputation because I am the one who, as his diocesan bishop, should have something to say about this, if anyone does," said Bishop Morlino in an August interview with the *National Catholic Register*.

Defending Ryan's reputation, his local bishop said that Ryan is a Catholic who "is very careful to fashion and form his conclusions in accord with the principles" of Catholic social doctrine.

But just what is "Catholic social doctrine"? To most people it sounds bizarre and sectarian, perhaps as bizarre as the individualist Ayn Rand philosophy that Ryan says he has repudiated in favour of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas.

"I reject her philosophy," Ryan said earlier this year about Ayn Rand. "It's an atheist philosophy. It reduces human interactions down to mere contracts and it is antithetical to my worldview. If somebody is going to try to paste a person's view on epistemology to me, then give me Thomas Aquinas."

"Epistemology" means "theory of knowledge." Aquinas is famous for being a "realist" in epistemology because of his recognition of the primacy of sense experience. Presumably Ryan wishes to affirm that he adheres to "realism," whereas Rand espouses an idiosyncratic capitalist idealism.

What then does Ryan's bishop like about the avowedly "Thomist" realism favoured by Ryan? In fact, it is a philosophy neither distinctively "Catholic" nor a relic of 13th-century intellectual culture. Rather, it is a classically Western

way of thinking about nature and custom. It even goes back to pre-Christian pagan Greek thinkers.

The word for "custom" in ancient Greek is *nomos*, which can also be translated as "law." The word names a major theme in the ancient Greek poetry of Hesiod, for example.

"Here's a better custom for you," sang Hesiod in a poem to his litigious brother Perses. "Stay out of debt and don't go hungry." His point was that Perses's poverty was due to unwise financial management.



Paul Ryan

Envious and prodigal, Perses had sized up Hesiod's relative prosperity. Perses took Hesiod to court to cheat him out of his share of their inheritance from their father. At least that's how Hesiod tells the story, in a Greek poem from the eighth century B.C. known to us in English translation as *Hesiod's Works and Days*.

Because of this poem, Hesiod is considered the first economic thinker in the West. But what motivated Hesiod's analysis was a burning passion for justice. Hesiod reports that Perses had bribed the local politicians and judges in order to cheat him. In disgust, Hesiod's poetry denounces partisanship and the corrupt competitions of the law courts.

Reading Hesiod, we learn that attacking those who are richer than us is hardly a new idea, let alone one that Hesiod would endorse. Instead, the poet commends an agrarian lifestyle in harmony with nature, along



The ancient Greeks who built the Parthenon developed the classic pagan wisdom of humane realism, now shared by Paul Ryan, writes Morrissey.

“Human law is a good guide for human conduct only if it is in harmony with natural law.”

— St. Thomas Aquinas

with the healthy competition of individual initiative.

As a counter-example to Perses's ignoble wrangling, Hesiod points to how his poem, the *Theogony*, emerged victorious in a poetry competition.

Not only did Hesiod win supreme accolades in his own day, but the *Theogony* continues to enchant students of classical mythology, who recognize it as an indispensable crash course in Greek mythology.

The *Theogony* tells a tale of the gods' cosmic origins. After two unjust generations, Zeus was born in hiding. Zeus came to rule over his corrupt and stupid predecessors because of his superior justice and wisdom. Hesiod's vivid examples



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of what just political order looks like have earned the poem a classic status.

In its sequel, the *Works and Days*, Hesiod focuses on justice in human affairs. He exhorts his brother Perses to find honest work, and to look to nature as a guide for just action.

This humane realism is a philosophy shared not just by Paul Ryan and his bishop, and not just by Popes and "Catholic social doctrine," but by the classic pagan wisdom of ancient Greek poets and philosophers.

It is a way of thinking best termed "catholic" (with a non-sectarian, lower-case letter "c"). After all, "catholic" is simply the Greek word for "universal." This mode of classical thought

tries to discern "natural law": namely, how human customs can best be in accord with universal nature and natural human inclinations.

It is what "Catholic" social doctrine has in common with classic Catholic thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, and also with classic Catholic thinkers like the ancient Greeks: a view of social justice in terms of natural law.

Aquinas says that human law (*lex humana*) is the law that we humans make; for example, speed limits and other traffic laws. Aquinas says that human law is a good guide for human conduct only if it is in harmony with natural law (*lex naturalis*), which is the law knowable by rational crea-

tures as their minds share in the eternal law (*lex aeterna*) that is God Himself.

"How, exactly, do we determine whether laws and economic and social policies respect the natural law? This is the important question," said professor Joseph Trabbic of Ave Maria University's Philosophy Department, commenting on the Paul Ryan controversy.

"If we are going to try to figure out whether Paul Ryan's economic, social, and political ideas are Thomistic, first of all we need truly to understand those ideas and have a grasp of the details of the context in which he offers them. And then we must have prudence and a knowledge of Aquinas's natural law doctrine."

"Prudence is the intellectual virtue that permits us to make the right judgments about what should or should not be done (or what law or policy to enact) in a given situation. Aquinas believes that those who truly have prudence are very few. Like the acquisition of all intellectual and moral virtues, the acquisition of prudence requires much experience, a great deal of personal effort, a good guide, and grace."

Only an ideologue like Perses could take such classic realism and mischaracterize it for partisan purposes. May the poetry of Hesiod, and the philosophy of Aquinas, teach us prudence, and graciously guide us into virtue. That'd be the cure for our rotten politics.

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