

SISTER, CAN YOU RUN FOR PRESIDENT?

AQUINAS' POLITICAL THOUGHT AND THE REVISED *CODE OF CANON LAW*

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“Sister, can you run for President?” a student in my tenth-grade theology class inquired. “Thank God, no,” I answered. The revised *Code of Canon Law*’s (1983) prohibition of clergy and religious from holding civil office affirms the importance of the distinct vocations and apostolates of both religious and the laity. Six hundred years earlier, St. Thomas Aquinas articulated similar principles in his account of the roles of the priesthood, religious consecration, and good government in the life of the state. This paper will argue that the 1983 *Code* is more in line with Aquinas’ account of the roles of clergy and religious consecration and of the distinction of temporal and spiritual power than previous configurations of ecclesial legislation. Furthermore, this arrangement is in the best interest of priests, religious, and the state.

Lack of temporal power (the purse and the sword) tends to support moral and spiritual authority, whereas use of temporal power tends to undermine this. Aquinas and the early Dominicans learned this lesson from the beginnings of the Dominican Order itself. In his exhaustive biography of Saint Dominic de Guzman, M. H. Vicaire relates how Dominic, then a canon travelling with his bishop Diego of Osma on a preaching mission through France to combat the prevalent Albigensian heresy, found that the lavish, princely retinues with which bishops and religious often travelled were an impediment to their preaching.¹ By contrast, the Albigensian heretics were known for their extreme poverty and austerity, and this outward display of piety was a convincing argument that drew many to their erroneous and otherwise poorly argued teachings.² The Catholic missionaries found it difficult to make any headway among them until Diego suggested that they send away their retinues and preach Christ in poverty and simplicity like the Apostles. They went barefoot, without money, begging their daily

¹ M. H. Vicaire, *Saint Dominic and His Times*, trans. Kathleen Pond. (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1964), 89-92.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 75ff.

bread and keeping only those books necessary for prayer and study.³ The plan was a tremendous success; the Catholic missionaries began winning converts. After Diego's death, the band of itinerant preachers with Dominic at its head was formally established as the Order of Preachers in 1216.

Dominic insisted that this would be a mendicant Order. Among his dying words to his brethren was the advice to "Keep humility, have charity, possess voluntary poverty."⁴ This Order expanded quickly and fervently throughout Europe and the university cities, and could boast of martyrs, missionaries to foreign lands, and novitiates bursting at the seams by the time the youngest son of the noble house of Aquino in Italy sought to enter its ranks in 1244.⁵ The then-teenaged Thomas d'Aquino was related on his mother's side to the notorious Emperor Frederick II and had been groomed from his pious youth in the wealthy and powerful nearby Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino to become Lord Abbot. However, he chose the Dominican Order instead, in spite of his family's most strenuous conniving to the contrary.⁶ This family conniving included promises and threats to Thomas' superiors in the Dominican Order, writing to the Pope, then kidnapping the young friar, detaining him in house arrest, and sending a prostitute to his chambers.⁷ Aquinas' later writings on the purpose and characteristics of the religious state, the evangelical counsels, mendicancy, preaching, and the permissibility of the young entering religious against the wishes of their parents could not have escaped the influence of the tumultuous early beginnings of his religious life.

³ Ibid., p. 91

⁴ Ibid., pp. 372-3, Chapter XIX footnotes 87, 88

⁵ J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Royal (Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C. 1996), 9.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Thomas Aquinas* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2002), 55-56.

⁷ Ibid., 56ff. Cf. J.-P. Torrell, 8-11.

For Aquinas, what distinguishes the religious life from the life of the layperson is emphatically not the pursuit of perfect charity. On the contrary: he repeats, “The perfection of the Christian life consists in charity.”⁸ Aquinas’ reading of the Sermon on the Mount contends that perfection is possible in this life: “The Divine law does not prescribe the impossible. Yet it prescribes perfection according to Matthew 5:48, ‘Be you . . . perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.’ Therefore seemingly one can be perfect in this life.”⁹ He insists that the essence of Christian perfection consists not in the observance of the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience as vowed by religious, but rather in the observance of the commandments which are enjoined upon all:

It is written (Deuteronomy 6:5): "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart," and (Leviticus 19:18): "Thou shalt love thy neighbor [Vulgate: 'friend'] as thyself"; and these are the commandments of which our Lord said (Matthew 22:40): "On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets." Now the perfection of charity, in respect of which the Christian life is said to be perfect, consists in our loving God with our whole heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Therefore it would seem that perfection consists in the observance of the precepts.¹⁰

Charity for Aquinas signified love of God as the source of man’s ultimate happiness and includes among its rightful objects self, neighbor, even the angels, as sharers in heaven’s fellowship.¹¹

This love is “primarily and essentially” what Christian perfection consists in, and the commandments direct man to do what is necessary to remain in charity and to avoid what is contrary to it, that is, to avoid mortal sin which destroys charity in the soul. Christian laypersons are not absolved from striving for perfect charity; indeed, they are commanded to do so by Christ Himself in the Gospel texts that Aquinas insists apply to all Christians. Aquinas was not alone in

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed. (1920), <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>, II-II q. 184 art. 2, cf. art. 1, 3

⁹ ST II-II q. 184 art. 2

¹⁰ ST II-II q. 184 art. 3

¹¹ ST II-II q. 25 art. 12

this insistence. The veneration the Church accorded to St. Monica, wife of a middle-class pagan and mother of St. Augustine, to those holy kings and queens eventually declared saints, including Aquinas' contemporary Louis IX of France (later canonized St. Louis), and to so many other saintly laypersons, reminded medieval Christians living in the world that personal holiness was a reality to strive for and overflowed as blessing for society and the Church.

However, there is also a “secondary and instrumental” dimension of Christian perfection that applies to the religious state for Aquinas.

Secondarily and instrumentally, however, perfection consists in the observance of the counsels, all of which, like the commandments, are directed to charity; yet not in the same way. For the commandments, other than the precepts of charity, are directed to the removal of things contrary to charity, with which, namely, charity is incompatible, whereas the counsels are directed to the removal of things that hinder the act of charity, and yet are not contrary to charity, such as marriage, the occupation of worldly business, and so forth.¹²

The commandments remove the things which cannot coexist with charity; the counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience remove things which can coexist with charity but may also hinder it. Possessions, marriage, and worldly business are not evil, but they have power to pull the mind and heart away from God. Religious renounce the legitimate use of these good things in order to embrace as immediately as possible in this life the greatest good, which is God. Having “[given] themselves up entirely to the divine service, as offering a holocaust to God,” religious “ad[here] wholly to God,” in which perfection consists, and as such the religious state can be called a “state of perfection.”¹³ The vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience are not a magic formula for perfect holiness, however. The realism of Aquinas' remark that “[N]othing hinders some from being perfect without being in the state of perfection, and some from being in the

¹² ST II-II q. 184 art. 3

¹³ ST II-II q. 185 art. 1

state of perfection without being perfect” likely reflects direct experience of life in the world and in the monastery.¹⁴

It may seem to follow from these initial considerations that the layperson and the religious occupy two separate spheres. In other words, it might seem to follow that the world belongs to the layperson and the pursuit of divine things belongs to the religious. None of these were hermetically sealed in Aquinas’ day, however. The layperson was to strive for the perfection of charity. Clerics and religious, for their part, were not wholly barred from taking part in what Aquinas terms “secular business.” The relationship between the things of God and the world only gets more intertwined in the case of rulers, whose duty according to Aquinas is ultimately to help their people reach heaven. In the *De Regno*, a small treatise on kingship written for the king of Cyprus, Aquinas maintains that the good life in this world is directed to another goal, namely, the enjoyment of God in heaven. As such, it “pertains to the king’s office to promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly happiness, that is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of Heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary.”¹⁵ The ruler, “taught the law of God,” is principally concerned with establishing, preserving and promoting the perfection of a virtuous life.¹⁶

Aquinas goes into some detail on the theme of the temporal duties of secular rulers in *De Regno* I.16. He explains that for the multitude as for the individual to lead a good life, virtuous action as well as a sufficiency of bodily goods are required. Consequently, the role of the ruler in

¹⁴ ST II-II 184.4

¹⁵ *De Regno ad Regem Cypri*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949), <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/DeRegno.htm>, 1.16 [115]

¹⁶ *De Regno* 1.16 [116]

promoting virtuous life is first to establish the peace for the multitude, without which the multitude would fight against itself and be hindered from acting virtuously; second, to direct virtuous actions; and finally to procure a sufficient supply of material things required for proper living.¹⁷ These are the primary duties of the ruler in establishing virtuous living. Aquinas then proposes three main tasks for the ruler to maintain virtuous living. First, he should conserve the public good by appointing to state offices men who are suited to perform the duties thereof. Second, he should protect the public good from the malice of wicked men within the population by instituting “laws and orders, rewards and punishments” to restrain men from harming the public good and to induce them to virtuous deeds. Lastly, the ruler should defend his people against external enemies.¹⁸ In summary, Aquinas’ vision of the duties of a temporal ruler are to establish the moral and material conditions in which individuals singly and as a multitude can progress in virtue. These pursuits would include commerce to promote material prosperity, warfare to defend against external dangers, making laws and establishing punishments and rewards, and appointing capable persons in charge of various offices.

Thomas distinguishes temporal from spiritual authority, even as he places them in a close relationship:

Thus, in order that spiritual things might be distinguished from earthly things, the ministry of this kingdom [of God] has been entrusted not to earthly kings but to priests, and most of all to the chief priest, the successor of St. Peter, the Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff. To him all the kings of the Christian People are to be subject as to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For those to whom pertains the care of intermediate ends should be subject to him to whom pertains the care of the ultimate end, and be directed by his rule.¹⁹

¹⁷ *De Regno* 1.16 [117].

¹⁸ *De Regno* 1.16 [120]

¹⁹ *De Regno* 1.15 [110]

Since the goal of good government (the multitude living well) is directed to a higher goal (the beatitude of heaven) and since God entrusts priests with teaching the means to the higher goal, it is proper that kings (the temporal rulers) be subject to the priesthood. If kings are subject to priests, and both are concerned with getting people to heaven, then why not streamline and have priest-kings? Or, on the other hand, a simple solution could be sought in which clerics and religious kept solely to the realm of the spirit and out of the world's business. Aquinas, however, allows neither solution to the ambiguous question of where the spiritual authority ends and temporal authority begins, and vice versa. He insists upon keeping the spiritual and the temporal spheres distinct, even if they do overlap when the needs of souls require it.

Clerics and religious, as noted already, were not wholly barred from taking part in what Aquinas terms "secular business." Referring to the *Decretals*, the collection of Church law published by Gratian in 1139 as a textbook for canon law students at universities,²⁰ Thomas bases his qualified approval of religious and clerics involving themselves in secular business upon circumstances of charity:

We must conclude therefore that it is unlawful for either monks or clerics to carry on secular business from motives of avarice; but from motives of charity, and with their superior's permission, they may occupy themselves with due moderation in the administration and direction of secular business. Wherefore it is said in the *Decretals* (Dist. xxxviii, can. *Decrevit*): "The holy synod decrees that henceforth no cleric shall buy property or occupy himself with secular business, save with a view to the care of the fatherless, orphans, or widows, or when the bishop of the city commands him to take charge of the business connected with the Church." And the same applies to religious as to clerics, because they are both debarred from secular business on the same grounds.²¹

In accord with the spirit of detachment which forms the interior dimension of the vow of poverty, clerics and religious are able to engage in secular business when charity requires it. In keeping

²⁰ James L. Wiser, *Political Philosophy: A History of the Search for Order* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 124.

²¹ ST II-II q. 187 art. 2.

with the surrender of their will made in the vow of obedience, clerics and religious are only to engage in such business with the consent of their superiors. Could a priest or religious hold civil office “from motives of charity?” Aquinas does not directly answer this question, which is at first surprising, given the number of other pursuits that he lists as lawful or not for clerics and religious. Clerics and religious may engage in secular business, as stated above; but they may not engage in warfare or commercial activities as these “unsettle the mind too much,” and “hinder the mind very much from the contemplation of Divine things, the praise of God, and prayers for the people, which belong to the duties of a cleric.”²² If a religious or cleric is not to engage in these activities, then it would seem *a fortiori* that they should not hold civil office, which would involve them on a greater scale in the very activities that hinder their primary duties. However, the absence of a clear-cut answer is likely due to the complex interplay of spiritual and temporal authority in medieval political and ecclesial life, particularly in the office of the pope.

The spiritual and temporal realms were logically distinct but functionally intertwined in the Western Christendom of Thomas’ day. With the resolution of the lay investiture crisis by the compromise at the Diet of Worms in 1122,²³ the simoniacal practice of buying and selling ecclesiastical offices lessened and the privilege of appointing bishops was withdrawn from Christendom’s temporal princes and this power was restored to the successor of Peter. This move helped to preserve the Church’s spiritual authority vis-a-vis the state such that the Church was not simply an arm or mouthpiece of the state run by the prince’s cronies. Furthermore, it helped to underscore the purpose for which ecclesiastical offices exist in the first place: not for temporal advantage but to fulfill the command of Christ to “Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep” (John 21:15,

²² ST II-II q. 40 art. 2

²³ Wiser, 109

16). The popes of medieval Christendom were themselves the temporal lords of the Papal States in Italy, and as such had the power to wield both purse and sword in defense of their territory. The possession of land and armies was supposed to protect the spiritual freedom and authority of the Church from being suborned by temporal powers on whose mercy the Church would otherwise have to depend. Wars between the Papal States and the Emperor or other Italian city-states were frequent. The d'Aquino family initially supported Emperor Frederick II's armies against the papal forces; later, Thomas' older brothers Landolfo and Rinaldo gave their loyalty to the Pope. Rinaldo was one of those who assisted in Thomas' abduction; he was executed by order of Frederick II in 1246 and subsequently venerated by the family as a martyr for the Church.²⁴ To speak of separation of Church and state at this time would be an anachronism. The medieval Christian was a person of this world and of the Kingdom of God, and at times the boundaries blurred.

Aquinas comes the closest to demarcating the boundaries between the two powers in an early work, his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. He reaffirms that both spiritual and temporal power derive from the divine power (“*quod potestas spiritualis et saecularis, utraque deducitur a potestate divina*”) and then explains that one or the other may take precedence in a given situation. He states that temporal power is subject to spiritual power in matters that pertain to the salvation of the soul, so in these matters it is better to obey the spiritual rather than the temporal authority (“*intantum saecularis potestas est sub spirituali, inquantum est ei a Deo supposita, scilicet in his quae ad salutem animae pertinent; et ideo in his magis est obediendum potestati spirituali quam saeculari*”). However, in things that pertain to the civil

²⁴ Torrell, 3, 9-10

good (“*bonum civile*”), he quotes Matthew 22:21 (“Give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s”) to the effect that it is better to obey the temporal rather than the spiritual authority (“*magis obediendum potestati saeculari quam spirituali*”).²⁵ So spiritual authority has the prior claim on the Christian’s obedience when the salvation of his soul is at stake, and temporal authority has the prior claim on obedience when the matter at stake primarily concern the civil good. Applying this rule in practice was a thorny affair, however. When a matter pertains both to the civil good and to the good of souls, such as whether to enlist in the military during a particular conflict, or responding to the activities of heretics or unbelievers in the state, or questions of marriage law, which power has primacy? It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which the civic good and the good of souls might appear to conflict, with temporal authority and spiritual authority calling for different courses of action and both claiming primacy over the people’s obedience. It is beyond the limited scope of this paper to resolve such a conflict. It will have to suffice to point out simply that Aquinas has a proposed rule for demarcating the scope of the two powers which, however, raises at least as many questions as it answers.

Aquinas notes one explicit exception to the distinction between temporal and spiritual rulers, namely, the office of the papacy. In his commentary on the *Sentences* as in *De Regno* I. 15 he points to the Pope as one who is both priest and ruler. However, in the *Sentences* he takes the point further by noting that the Pope is not only a priest and ruler in the spiritual realm, but that he is a temporal ruler as well, who has the “apex” of both spiritual and temporal authority by the dispensation of Christ (“*Nisi forte potestati spirituali etiam saecularis potestas conjungatur, sicut in Papa, qui utriusque potestatis apicem tenet, scilicet spiritualis et saecularis, hoc illo*

²⁵ *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Corpus Thomisticum, S. Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia (1856 ed.), <http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/snp2044.html>, II. 44 ex. ad 4

disponente qui est sacerdos et rex in aeternum.”)²⁶ The papacy seems to be the only exception Aquinas notes to the principle that religious and clerics do not lawfully engage in the activities proper to temporal rulers.

Later centuries would witness clerics in high office in civil government, of which Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor in Henry VIII’s England and Cardinal Richelieu as First Minister in Louis XIII’s France are two of the most famous examples. Closer to the present day, the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* allowed for priests to hold positions in civil government with the permission of their superiors. Thus under the 1917 *Code* Father Richard Drinan, member of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), was first elected to the House of Representatives for Massachusetts in 1971 and served five terms with a voting record repeatedly in favor of abortion, a matter of grave public scandal. In 1980, Pope John Paul II announced publicly that priests would no longer be permitted to hold public office.²⁷ In that same year, Father Drinan was ordered by the Vatican not to stand for re-election and he immediately submitted by withdrawing from the election.²⁸ Father Drinan’s submission contrasts with the response of other clerics and religious in political office. Maryknoll priest Father Miguel d’Escoto Brockman in 1979 became Foreign Minister in Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. Father Fernando Cardenal, SJ became Nicaragua’s Minister of Education and his blood brother, Father Ernesto Cardenal, a Franciscan, was made Minister of culture. None of the priests had received approval from their superiors for the position, which was required by the 1917 *Code* then in force. Thus they were in flagrant violation of church law.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cathy Caridi, “Can Priests Hold Public Office?” September 20, 2012, Canon Law Made Easy, <http://canonlawmadeeasy.com/2012/09/20/can-priests-hold-public-office-2/>

²⁸ Robert Spaeth, “Priests and Sisters Should Avoid Political Office,” February 1, 1985, *Crisis Magazine*, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/1985/priests-and-sisters-should-avoid-political-office>

The following year, Pope John Paul II announced a ban on clergy holding political office and in 1983 promulgated the revised *Code of Canon Law* in which clergy and religious and religious are explicitly prohibited from seeking public office. The relevant Canon 285 states:

§1 Clerics are to refrain completely from all those things which are unbecoming to their state, according to the prescripts of particular law.

§2. Clerics are to avoid those things which, although not unbecoming, are nevertheless foreign to the clerical state.

§3 Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.²⁹

Canon 672 applies Canon 285 and others to members of religious Orders. Significantly, there is no provision in Canon 285 for a dispensation to be made to the prohibition by superiors, as in the 1917 *Code*. Such a proviso was included in the 1977 draft of the revised *Code* but ultimately rejected from the final revision.³⁰ The *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* published by the Canon Law Society of America explains that these canons apply to both religious and clergy “because like the ordained, religious are by profession public ministers of the Church, and certain activities have been judged generally inappropriate or unbecoming for public ecclesial ministers.”³¹

Clergy and religious are similarly enjoined in the 1983 *Code* not to “have an active part in political parties and in governing labor unions,” with the caveat that “competent ecclesiastical authority” may permit such involvement in political parties if “the protection of the rights of the Church or the promotion of the common good requires it.”³² The rationale for the prohibition of clergy and religious holding public office and eschewing unnecessary political involvement echoes Aquinas’ reasoning that clerics and religious should avoid involvement in those things

²⁹ *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English edition* (Washington, D.C., Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

³⁰ John Beal, James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, eds. *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 376

³¹ *New Commentary*, 841

³² *CIC* 287 §2

that hinder their primary vocation and his idea of the distinction of two powers. The role of priests and religious is primarily that of evangelical witness to love of God and neighbor by devoting themselves above all to contemplation, and to teach what belongs to salvation, and to pray for the people. These, in addition to the salvation of their own souls, are the gifts that clergy and religious offer to the state from their specific vocation. This is not to say that clergy and religious are altogether banned from the political arena. Clergy and religious are not forbidden from belonging to organizations or having an advisory role in them; still less are they forbidden from voting in civil elections. Even more essentially, the duty of teaching would include assisting persons in forming their consciences properly on complex issues, which is the basis of most of the overlap of the spiritual authority into the political sphere. The field of politics belongs first and foremost to the laity, and clergy and religious are to acknowledge the rightful primacy of lay persons in this sphere. The *New Commentary* explains: “this restriction on political activity is based on the distinctive role of the clergy vis-a-vis the laity. Political activity ordinarily belongs to lay persons...It is important that the clergy be seen first and foremost as representatives of the Church.”³³

In light of the directives from the Vatican and the 1983 *Code*, Fr. Drinan withdrew from seeking political office. The priests mentioned in Nicaragua chose not to respond at all. When Pope John Paul II visited Nicaragua in 1983, he shook his finger to a kneeling Fr. Ernesto Cardenal and urged him, “You must regularize your condition in the Church!”³⁴ Fr. Ernesto did not do so, and was suspended from active ministry. His brother Fr. Fernando likewise remained in politics and was released from the Society of Jesus; however, he has since left politics, been

³³ *New Commentary*, 380

³⁴ Caridi, “Can Priests Hold Public Office?”

re-instated in the Society and is ministering again as a Jesuit priest.³⁵ Fr. D’Escoto Brockman was suspended from active priestly ministry and continued in politics, being elected President of the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2008-9. He was nominated by Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi as Libya’s representative to the United Nations but not ultimately appointed. In 2014, Pope Francis lifted Fr. D’Escoto Brockman’s suspension after the latter wrote to him expressing the desire to “celebrate the holy Eucharist again before dying.”³⁶ Fr. D’Escoto Brockman died in 2017.

A number of religious Sisters have also faced the choice of political office or being in good standing with the Church. Sister Agnes Mary Mansour, RSM, accepted an appointment as director of Social Services from Michigan Governor James Blanchard on December 29, 1982. Her Archbishop, Edmund Szoka, revoked his prior permission for her holding office, which had been on condition that she publicly oppose abortion, which she failed to do. Vatican representative Auxiliary Bishop Anthony Bevilacqua of Brooklyn formally offered the choice of resigning from political office or being dispensed from her religious vows. In the hearing that followed, Sister Mansour stated of Archbishop Szoka: “His demand of me and of my religious superiors that I resign... raised once again the suspicion that the church can intrude in state affairs and Catholics, much less a Catholic sister, are not free from church control.”³⁷ Less surprising than her evident sense that Catholics and Catholic Sisters ought to be “free from church control,” which control in this case seems to refer to canon law and her own presumably voluntary vow of obedience, was Sister Mansour’s choice to be dispensed from her vows. In

³⁵ Cathy Caridi, “Can Priests Hold Public Office?”

³⁶ “Suspension of Nicaraguan Maryknoll priest lifted,” Catholic News Agency, August 4, 2014, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/suspension-of-nicaraguan-maryknoll-priest-lifted-32102>

³⁷ *Origins*, 31 March 1983, quoted in Robert Spaeth, “Priests and Sisters Should Avoid Political Office”

Rhode Island in 1984, two Sisters of Mercy Elizabeth Morancy, a State Representative and Arlene Violet, a candidate for Rhode Island Attorney General, similarly chose to leave their Order rather than withdraw from political office.³⁸ Whatever can be said in defense of the motives of these religious priests and Sisters in public office, it is evident by their choice to be dispensed from their vows rather than serve the public good in a way that harmonized with their vocations as vowed religious, that they prioritized their service in political office over their religious consecration.

“If I had served God half as well as I have served my king, he would not have left me to die in this place.” Thus lamented the disenfranchised and deeply compromised Cardinal Wolsey on his deathbed in the screen adaptation of Robert Bolt’s “A Man for All Seasons.” Nearly twenty centuries of hindsight on the successes and failures of the Church’s involvement in political affairs animated the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*’s revisions barring clerics and religious from holding political office. The 1983 revisions of the *Code of Canon Law* echo the key themes of Aquinas’ thought on politics: his personal choice to eschew temporal power as a religious, his insistence upon priests and religious withdrawing from the temporal sphere in all that would hinder their single-minded pursuit of charity (with the caveat that they involve themselves in secular business insofar as charity requires it), his distinction of temporal and spiritual power, and the teaching role of the clergy. He would, in all likelihood, have preferred the current ecclesiastical legislation to the arrangement that prevailed in his day.

³⁸ Robert Spaeth, “Priests and Sisters Should Avoid Political Office”

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