

## TOCQUEVILLE'S "ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION" AND THE CATHOLIC PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

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L. Joseph Hebert<sup>1</sup>

*This article offers an outline of administrative decentralization, subsidiarity, and related principles as they emerge from Tocqueville's account of American democracy and the social teachings of the Catholic Church, respectively, accompanied by an analysis of the philosophic and theological underpinnings of each account. This analysis reveals a profound theoretical as well as practical harmony between the two notions: namely, that both are grounded in the potential of human beings to perfect themselves through virtuous actions, which society must foster in a fashion that preserves the freedom of citizens, who can achieve the common good only by taking active responsibility for it.*

In *Democracy in America* (1835–1840), Alexis de Tocqueville admires the framers of the United States Constitution for the artful way in which they separated and balanced political powers within the Union, including the ingenious manner in which they divided sovereignty between the federal and state governments—a division now known as federalism. Tocqueville attributes the ultimate success of liberty in America, however, to a feature of American political order he refers to as “administrative decentralization,” which—going beyond federalism as such—fosters the participation of citizens in “real . . . political life” beginning at the local (sub-state) level (40, 82–93).<sup>2</sup> Though not explicitly mandated by the federal constitution,<sup>3</sup> the decentralized management of political and social affairs Tocqueville observed in America was rooted in a tradition he traced to certain municipalities of England through the influence of the Puritans (27–44). Though Tocqueville is not uncritical of certain presuppositions underlying this tradition, he heartily embraces many of its effects, especially the profound attachment of citizens to their own participatory rights and to issues of common concern, attachments born of the personal experiences of local political and associational life (82–93, 225–231). A central feature of the “new political science” Tocqueville seeks to articulate in *Democracy* (7) is this principle of administrative decentralization coupled with the “science of association” it fosters (492).<sup>4</sup>

Tocqueville's American-inspired notion of decentralization is strikingly similar to the Catholic social principle of subsidiarity,<sup>7</sup> first so

labeled in Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), but traceable to Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1892), and powerfully reaffirmed by popes up to the present day. This principle states that "one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry," and that "it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the large and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies." When individuals or small groups cannot perform necessary functions, state assistance (*subsidium*) is permissible and even obligatory, but it must be carefully limited so as not to "destroy or absorb" the lesser body (QA, no. 79).<sup>5</sup> In short, the recent Catholic Magisterium, like Tocqueville before it, insists that a political liberty worthy of the name be characterized not only by limits to the functions of central government—state as well as federal—but also by the fostering of the virtues manifested and developed in the free and responsible actions of individuals, families, and local political and civil associations.

The significance of this conjunction between Tocqueville and the Church emerges when we consider the condition of democratic governance today. In the century and a half since Tocqueville first sounded a warning about modern society's slide toward "administrative despotism" (664), a more or less pronounced—but universally decisive—movement toward the "welfare state" has taken place in advanced nations. Though this co-option by centralized authority of care for social and even individual needs has not been without controversy, agreement on grounds for opposing it, moderating it, or devising an alternative response to modern problems has remained elusive. Missing from most European and American discourse on this topic is any clear and accepted principle that socialization and governance must operate at a level facilitating the active engagement of citizens, whose genuine interests can be realized only through association. The need for such a principle leads us back to Tocqueville's "new political science" and to the principles of Catholic social doctrine. In both of these sources we find not only a recommendation that subsidiarity (or administrative decentralization) be adopted, but also a careful theoretical account of these and related political principles articulated with a view to their pursuit by thoughtful but active and democratically accountable civic leaders.

This article will offer a brief outline of administrative decentralization, subsidiarity, and related principles as they emerge from Tocqueville's account of American democracy and the social teachings of the popes, respectively, accompanied by an analysis of the

philosophic and theological underpinnings of each account. This analysis will reveal a profound theoretical as well as practical similarity between the two notions: namely, that both are grounded in the potential of human beings to perfect themselves through virtuous actions, which society must foster in a fashion that preserves the freedom of citizens, who can achieve the common good only by taking active responsibility for it.<sup>7</sup> The application of these insights to the problems of articulating and instituting subsidiarity in contemporary democratic societies must await further study.

### ***Democracy in America and Administrative Decentralization***

The seeds of Tocqueville's account of administrative decentralization are found in the second chapter of *Democracy*, in which he traces "the two or three ideas that today form the bases of the social theory of the United States" to Puritan New England, whose settlers inherited and built upon certain "principles of true liberty" developed in the mother country during struggles with the Tudor monarchy (31, 29). What impresses Tocqueville most about the Puritans is the marvelous fashion in which they combined "the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of liberty*" (43, emphasis in original). The Puritans perceived individual liberty as existing within a moral order that gave it both limits and direction. Liberty, in the words of John Winthrop, was "for that only which is just and good" (42); and it was accompanied in the townships of New England by a powerful sense of duty—the duty of the individual to participate in "a real, active, altogether democratic and republican political life" productive of policies seeing to all social needs, including the maintenance of moral order grounded in the Christian religion and the traditional family, as well as the material welfare and the private liberties of citizens (32–38, 40–41).

Proceeding to his analysis of Jacksonian democratic institutions, Tocqueville declares the "necessity of studying what takes place in the particular states before speaking of the government of the Union." This order is necessary both because the states preceded the Union historically—hence retaining a primacy in the mores of Americans—and because of the doctrine of federalism, which ensures that states retain a "habitual and undefined" sovereignty over "the daily needs of society" (56). Yet Tocqueville's treatment of "what happens in the particular states" consists almost entirely of a discussion of what he calls "the township system in America," or of a de facto administrative decentralization, which he defines as the direction of local affairs by local rather than state agents. In fact, Tocqueville maintains that

“ordinarily it is the townships and officers of townships who . . . regulate the details of social existence and promulgate prescriptions relative to public health, good order, and the morality of citizens”—the very essence of the “police power” traditionally attributed to state governments (57–65, 66–79, 82–93).

Tocqueville explains his choice to make “the township system” and “administrative decentralization” central features of his treatment of American democracy as follows:

It is not by chance that I examine the township first. The township is the sole association that is so much in nature that everywhere men are gathered, a township forms by itself. Township society therefore exists among all peoples, whatever their usages and their laws may be; it is man who makes kingdoms and creates republics; the township appears to issue directly from the hands of God (57).

If “God and human nature” comprise the general idea from which almost all human actions are born—as Tocqueville later argues (417–18)—then the naturalness and seemingly divine provenance of the township would appear to render it essential to human flourishing. Indeed, in the pages that follow, Tocqueville asserts the naturalness of a civic-minded virtue practicable by most only at the local level, arguing that a “vague instinct of the *patrie* [fatherland] . . . never abandons the heart of man” (89), that it makes itself felt most powerfully by means of the active participation encouraged by administrative decentralization (90), and that, “after the liberty to act alone, the most natural to man is that of . . . acting in common,” so that “the right of association [is] almost as inalienable in its nature as individual liberty” (184). According to “the natural sense of words,” “good citizens” are “those who aspire to unite their efforts to create common prosperity.” Those who rather “confine themselves narrowly to themselves” easily fall prey to despots and despotism (485), becoming “*des administrés*” (64)—beings who are administered, rather than human beings living in accordance with the liberty and equality of their nature (413). Local liberty emerges as an indispensable means of preserving and cultivating the naturally social and political—what Tocqueville would call the *associational*—character of man.

Despite its close connection to the natural and divine human calling, local liberty is both difficult to establish politically and highly “exposed to the invasions of power.” The “coarser elements” of which townships are composed tend to repulse enlightened legislators and

other members of “a very civilized society,” whose sophomoric contempt breeds intolerance of local liberty, robbing society of “the final result of experience” from which to judge this institution more accurately. Security against such attitudes comes only when township liberty has entered into mores, which in turn requires that it have long been supported, or at least tolerated, in the laws (57). Despite these obstacles to its achievement, however, Tocqueville does not shy away from proclaiming the indispensability of administrative decentralization to genuine liberty:

The institutions of a township are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within reach of the people . . . . Without the institutions of a township a nation can give itself a free government, but *it does not have the spirit of liberty* (57–58, emphasis added).

### **The Limits and Promises of Local Democratic Liberty**

Tocqueville’s encomium of township liberty notwithstanding, the details of his analysis prove him to be no blind partisan of local liberty. He begins by noting that the average township of his day “numbers two to three thousand inhabitants, [and] is therefore not so extensive that all its inhabitants do not have nearly the same interests” (58). This reminds us of *The Federalist’s* observation that factious and tyrannical majorities form all too easily at the local level, and Publius’ conclusion that a large representative republic, in which interest can be made to check and moderate interest, is therefore vital to the preservation of liberty.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Tocqueville immediately goes on to describe the people of the American township as “a master who has to be pleased up to the farthest limits of the possible,” and which will not tolerate the dilution of its own power by representative government except where absolutely necessary (59). Tocqueville’s own warnings about majority tyranny (235–49), his admiration for the artful way in which the U.S. constitution preserves liberty by checking its excesses (105–161), and his insistence that administrative decentralization be combined with governmental centralization—the regulation of state and national interests at the state or national level (82, 369)—confirm that Tocqueville does not simply approve of this populist tendency in townships. In fact, the local liberty he celebrates is not literally like that of ancient Athens (40), but is rather one benevolently circumscribed by higher political and religious authorities.<sup>9</sup>

Further and graver dangers of local independence emerge as Tocqueville's account proceeds. In the American mind, township liberty is based in the "dogma of the sovereignty of the people," which in turn rests on the assumption that "each individual is . . . as enlightened, as virtuous, as strong as any of his fellows," and is therefore "the best as well as the only judge of his particular interest." Such an individual agrees to obey society only because it "appears useful to him" and cannot exist without "a regulating power"; but he demands that this regulating power limit itself to the prevention of injury and the elicitation of necessary cooperation. By extension, the affairs of a township, county, or state are best managed by its own members unless needs of a higher social order are clearly at stake (61–62).

The flaws in this framework for local liberty appear most clearly when we consider Tocqueville's later treatment of the "philosophical" tendency of democratic citizens "to seek the reason for things by themselves and in themselves alone" (403). Though the desire to evaluate important claims in the light of individual reason may seem wholly admirable, its long-term sociological corollary is the willingness of citizens to "deny what they cannot comprehend" (404), a fact that proves problematic due to the limitations of both individuals themselves and their practical circumstances. Without mitigation, this tendency threatens to inculcate an overreliance on majority opinion, a preference for "very superficial and very uncertain notions" about the world, and a relativistic denial of the existence of objective truths regarding God and human nature (407–418). Specific errors that Tocqueville anticipates include thoughtless progressivism (426–28), pragmatism (433–39), statism (443–44), the loss of higher culture and debasement of popular culture (445–450), a preference for equality over liberty (479–482), individualism as social-political apathy (482–84), and an excessive concern for petty personal gains in social status and material well-being (506–522).

Though Tocqueville writes to combat these dangers, he regards the individualistic attitude from whence they spring as an inevitable fact of modern social conditions. Rather than flatly repudiate this unavoidable if dangerous attitude, therefore, Tocqueville calls upon statesmen to channel it toward a set of activities and experiences whose meaning and goodness are best appreciated from a philosophic vantage point richer than that initially entertained by democratic citizens themselves. This vantage point—Tocqueville's own—acknowledges that human beings are naturally constituted to act in light of a moral order rooted in the general ideas of God and human nature. Since the human soul is uplifted by and considers legitimate actions harmonious with

such an order, while it is degraded and considers illegitimate actions motivated by desires contradicting this order (8, 472, 520), individual happiness depends upon a person's ability to grasp and live in accordance with it, overcoming contrary desires through self-mastery, sacrificing goods of a lesser order, and giving preference to those pure and disinterested passions that prepossess the noblest souls (247, 435–37, 456, 472, 502, 509–510, 517–520). This sort of happiness is made possible by what Tocqueville calls virtue, the habitual and free choice of what is objectively good (42, 227).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the happiness of the political community depends upon the maintenance of a shared conception of moral order, without which collective action becomes impossible (227, 407). This is why patriotism and religion alone—and not a mere conjunction of selfish interests—can bring about the “free concurrence of wills” necessary to unite large numbers of men effectively (89). The key political question for Tocqueville becomes how to foster human happiness by cultivating those degrees and kinds of individual virtue, patriotism, and religion that a given political society and its members are able to achieve in freedom (13, 88, 509, 518–19).

In order to elicit the full potential of humanity, the concurrence of wills in the pursuit of moral good must be genuinely free: “man is so made that he prefers standing still to marching without independence toward a goal of which he is ignorant” (87). Tocqueville therefore regards liberty—both individual and associational—as a moral imperative sacred in its demands (11, 666). Yet Tocqueville also observes that the limitless and unguided liberty toward which modern social conditions tend risks abandoning men to an intellectual paralysis and moral cowardice destructive of both individual and civic virtue and conducive to the growth of a new form of despotism. Capitalizing on the metaphysical confusion and selfish desire of the individualistic soul to withdraw into himself and to exist for himself alone, such a despotism would guarantee to the mass of citizens the pursuit of “small and vulgar pleasures” by means of an administrative centralization robbing them of any opportunity to think, feel, or act for themselves in matters of higher concern. In the name of popular sovereignty and hyperindividualistic liberty, this tutelary power would wipe out all secondary social bodies, “taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and kneading him as it likes,” and covering society “with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, and uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls [could not] clear a way to surpass the crowd” (661–65).

Since neither moral order nor freedom of choice is sufficient in itself, a healthy political order must include institutions capable of

educating liberty and regulating its use while simultaneously ensuring that citizens have the daily opportunity to employ the faculties by which human beings identify and choose what is good, beneficial, and just. Administrative despotism may allow men to use their free will briefly and rarely in the election of their representatives, but it “brings them to renounce the use of their wills” in matters of common concern most of the time (83, 88, 664–65). Local liberty, by contrast, begins by appealing to the selfish interests of citizens, but it directs those interests toward a set of activities and experiences capable of developing the higher faculties and elevating the souls of its participants.

Tocqueville observed that the experiences of associational life, whether it was in the township assembly or in the host of voluntary societies abounding in Jacksonian America, shaped the American character in profound ways. Participation in associational life taught Americans to see the connection between their individual interests and the common good (486–88), to grasp the possibility and necessity of acting in common despite the individuating realities of modern life (496–500), to preserve the use of “their judgment and their free will” even when these departed from the opinions of the state or national majority (184–86, 250–51), to see the complexity of issues that may have seemed simple from an uninformed perspective, and to appreciate the superior knowledge and wisdom sometimes brought to the table by others (180–84, 232, 487, 489–92, 497). Likewise, political activity opened Americans’ hearts to unselfish or less selfish concerns, making them feel the presence of that *patrie* toward which the human heart is naturally inclined (89–90), giving them a sense of personal responsibility for its well-being (225–26, 497), causing them to cherish political liberty and willingly sacrifice some of their time, resources, and interests for the privilege of exercising political rights (227–28, 232–33), to feel an active love for their fellow citizens, to channel their ambitions toward the provision of public benefits, and even to recognize duty as well as interest as a motive force in their lives (485–88). In short, Tocqueville deemed administrative decentralization and the habits of local self-governance it fosters, despite their risks and flaws, to be essential if imperfect means of cultivating the associational nature of citizens and bringing them closer to genuine virtue and happiness.

### **The Role of Religion and the Family**

Both the necessity and the imperfection of administrative decentralization are clarified in Tocqueville’s discussion of the American doctrine of self-interest well understood. The individualistic attitude of

modern man tends to make him disregard higher authorities and remain unmoved by mere talk of the intrinsic beauty of virtue and sacrifice. By contrast, the American theory of self-interest well understood, teaching that “man, in serving his fellows, serves himself,” succeeds at drawing citizens into habits of public association whose value is truly explicable only in terms of a virtue in which they are unlikely to believe (500–503). The danger posed by this shortcoming in the modern paradigm of decentralization is significant. Not only are citizens potentially robbed of true fulfillment by their unwillingness to abandon their individualistic attitude even in the midst of experiences contradicting its premises; but the persistence of this attitude threatens to seduce citizens into the gradual abandonment of the liberty they love in exchange for petty comforts that they are disposed to love more—and which a centralized administrative state seems better able to secure (514–17, 653–59).

Tocqueville’s judgment on the possibility of moving beyond this impasse through a higher education in the art of being free remains inconclusive. This inconclusiveness, rather than being taken as a sign of defeat on Tocqueville’s part, should instead be regarded as a signal to democratic leaders marking the precise areas in which their influence will ultimately do the most good or harm to the prospects of modern democratic liberty. Among those areas—the battle lines on which self-interest well understood will press on toward virtue or retreat toward radical individualism—are religion and the family.

The doctrine of self-interest well understood “would be far from sufficient,” in Tocqueville’s view, without religion, “for there are a great number of sacrifices that can find their recompense only in the other world.” For the sake of the “immense inheritance” of Heaven, even the selfish soul can be brought to check its passions and sacrifice lesser pleasures. Just as with associational life, however, a choice originally motivated by self-interest, when considered more deeply, points toward a good transcending petty egoism. In the case of religion, Tocqueville makes clear that genuine Christianity teaches “that one ought to do good to one’s fellows” not to serve oneself—as self-interest “well understood” teaches—but “out of love of God.” In this “magnificent expression,” the man of true faith “freely associates himself” with “the admirable order of all things” ordained by God, expecting “no other recompense than the pleasure of contemplating it” (504–5). Once a week, therefore, the democratic citizen drawn to church by an otherworldly extension of self-interest may hear “strange discourses” speaking “of the innumerable evils caused by pride and covetousness,” “of the delicate enjoyments attached to virtue alone, and of the true happiness that accompanies it.” Having paused from his usual habits of commerce and pleasure, he

“enters into an ideal world in which all is great, pure, eternal,” and his “soul finally comes back into possession of itself and contemplates itself” (517). In short, religion holds the promise of lifting modern man above the limits of self-interest well understood to grasp the higher meaning and purpose of his life, which he is made to feel but not to understand by the experiences of associational life alone.

This promise of religion hinges, however, on the willingness of both common citizens and their political, social, and religious leaders to tolerate a pause in the otherwise relentless whirl of material and private endeavors characteristic of modern democratic society. In order to ensure that Christianity preserve its “genuine powers over souls” (278), a concerted effort is necessary on the part of contemporary preachers, politicians, social leaders, and the people themselves—through voluntary associations, for example—to preserve a sense of religion as “strange,” “great, pure, [and] eternal.” Without entirely refusing to adapt to democratic penchants, religion must maintain a certain separation from and elevation above daily life in order more effectively to turn souls away from petty concerns and keep them turned toward Heaven (420–24, 517–19).<sup>11</sup>

The cultivation of an appreciation for religion as a separate world intersecting our own was enhanced in Jacksonian America by the distinctive character of its family life. Tocqueville celebrates the sweetness surrounding the “natural bonds” of interest and affection arising from the circumstances of the American family (558–63, compare 46–50). However natural these family bonds are, however, Tocqueville sees them as vulnerable to the emerging democratic tendency that would “make man and woman into beings not only equal, but alike,” giving “both the same functions, impos[ing] the same duties on them, and accord[ing] them the same rights.” In response, Tocqueville celebrates American women, who, receiving an education he describes as quasi-philosophic, “often display a manly reason and a wholly virile energy,” while making a conscious, well-reasoned, and virtuous choice to apply their talents to the cultivation of domestic life (563–67, 573–76). As a result, American women tended to be preserved from certain corrupting influences of commerce: American religion, for example, “cannot moderate the ardor in [man] for enriching himself, . . . but it reigns as a sovereign over the soul of woman.” This victory for religion is a vital point, for “it is woman who makes mores,” both by caring for the home in which men retreat from the agitations of politics and commerce to find “order and peace” (279), and by overseeing the education of children, which in Jacksonian America is mostly “entrusted to the clergy”—presumably at the insistence of mothers (283).<sup>12</sup>

## The Emergence of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Doctrine

Catholic social doctrine, beginning in earnest with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), has built upon a bimillennial tradition rooted in Scripture and incorporating the efforts of Church Fathers, medieval doctors, and popes to apply the teachings of the Gospel and of sound moral philosophy to the permanent and changing problems of political society (*CSDC*, no. 87). While noting the drift of modern society away from Catholic principles, lamenting this trend, and calling society back to theoretical and practical rectitude, *Rerum Novarum* and subsequent documents also demonstrate the utility of this tradition by applying it to problems vexing all parties at a given time, such as the problems posed by the industrial revolution's impact upon class relations and questions raised about government attempts to address those problems. Since the principle of subsidiarity arises from this discourse, a brief review of the documents from which it emerges will aid us in grasping its meaning and scope.<sup>13</sup>

*Rerum Novarum* does not explicitly mention subsidiarity, yet it suggests this principle in the way it discusses limits to state intervention in economic affairs. Leo declares it "a great and pernicious error," for example, for the government to "penetrate and pervade the family and the household" in its attempts to aid citizens in need; for paternal authority to be abolished or absorbed by the state is "*against natural justice*," according to which children, before the age of reason, are in the care of their fathers (*RN*, no. 11, emphasis in original). Leo also urges the state, which is itself founded upon the "natural right" of men to associate, not to suppress those charitable and professional associations which—by binding workers to one other, to their employers, and to benevolent third parties—constitute the first and best means of remedying social ills (*RN*, nos. 37–8).

The formulation of subsidiarity cited in our introduction comes from *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), in which Pope Pius XI applies the doctrine of *Rerum Novarum*—then forty years old—to a world faced with financial crises and totalitarian ideologies as well as continuations of the problems Leo had addressed. The reform of government according to the principle of subsidiarity had become necessary, Pius argues, because "the evil of 'individualism'"—a denial or minimization of the public and social character of individual rights—had ruined a once flourishing "variety of prosperous and interdependent . . . associations," "leaving virtually only individuals and the State" as prominent social agents. As a result, the modern state is both spuriously glorified as the source of all salvation, and imprudently burdened with

tasks formerly left to individuals and smaller social bodies. Though it is permissible and necessary for the state to direct, supervise, encourage, and restrain these lesser agents as circumstances and the common good demand, the authority and vigor of the state as well as the happiness and prosperity of the commonwealth depend upon the maintenance and fostering of individual and local enterprise and responsibility for social concerns (QA, nos. 46, 76–80).

Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) develops the same principles in light of social problems now including recovery from two world wars, the dynamics of regional decolonization, and the tensions of the Cold War. John frames subsidiarity in light of newer social phenomena, including technical advances in central authority and the increasing complexity of social relationships, which have multiplied demands for state intervention. The danger is that the interventions of modern states will become widespread and penetrating, restricting the free actions of citizens within too narrow limits, destroying the private initiative on which material prosperity is based, suppressing the “natural inclination” of men to form *voluntary* associations, and impeding the full development of the human personality, which must combine freedom with responsibility. Though state intervention be demanded and be necessary in modern times, it cannot promote the common good of society—“the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to *achieve their own perfection*” (emphasis added)—unless it be structured in such a way as to guarantee that the “intermediary bodies” of society “be ruled by their own laws” more than by the intervening state (*MM*, nos. 51–67).

The Second Vatican Council, addressing the Church's relation to the modern world in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), emphasizes the danger of an ignorance or laziness that would cause modern man to “content himself with a merely individualistic morality.” Both nature and revelation proclaim the right and duty of each person to contribute to the common good of society through participation in public as well as private associations, “according to his own abilities and the needs of others.” Human dignity and freedom are realized only when citizens accept social responsibility, “cultivate in themselves the moral and social virtues, and promote them in society.” In fact, nothing short of “a higher degree of culture” producing “great-souled persons” is “desperately required by our times.” Though the common good cannot be secured by individuals, families, or small groups apart from the political community, higher authority must promote rather than hinder the “lawful and effective activity” of intermediate groups, coordinating and directing their actions to the common good, for which such groups must

remain jointly responsible. “For their part, citizens both as individuals and in association should be on guard against granting government too much authority and inopportunistically seeking from it excessive conveniences and advantages” (*GS*, nos. 30–1, 65, 74–5).

John Paul II had several occasions to review and develop the principle of subsidiarity. In *Laborum Exercens* (1981), for example, he not only defends the rights of associations, but also of the family in relation to the workplace. Responding to the “fact that in many societies women work in nearly every sector of life,” he stresses the need for a “family wage” so that the head of the family may support all dependents “without the spouse having to take up employment outside the home.” Women should not be “excluded from jobs of which they are capable,” but they should also be protected from “psychological or practical discrimination” when they choose to devote themselves to the care of children, and when they work, the workplace should be structured to accommodate their “irreplaceable role” as mothers (*LE*, no. 19).

John Paul’s major treatment of subsidiarity comes in *Centesimus Annus* (1991). A sound theory of the state, he proclaims, ensures the spiritual and temporal development of man by balancing powers to prevent the imposition of arbitrary wills or the violation of human rights. A democracy based on moral relativism, however, easily falls prey to an interest group politics productive of civic apathy and the violation of fundamental rights when they prove inconvenient. The only remedy for such dangers—and only true support for democratic society—lies in the development of a culture in which each citizen “exercises his creativity, intelligence, and knowledge of the world and of people,” and in which “he displays his capacity for self-control, personal sacrifice, solidarity and readiness to promote the common good.” Such a culture depends upon the protection of the liberty of the Church to form consciences, the strengthening of the traditional family, and the curbing of the “excesses,” “abuses,” and “malfunctions” of the “welfare state,” whose interventions into economic affairs “in recent years” have robbed citizens of social responsibility, sapped human energies, and bloated both the size and cost of administrative bodies. In economic affairs, primary responsibility for directing activities toward the common good must lie with individuals and small groups, while state intervention must be exceptional and brief. If the poor are to be assisted without violating their dignity by reducing them to objects of assistance, and if the average citizen is to overcome an increasingly widespread individualistic mentality, a weakening of consolidated power structures and strengthening of civil society must characterize new models of democratic self-governance (*CA*, nos. 43–52).

Pope Benedict XVI's response to the recent global financial crisis, given in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), leans heavily on the principle of subsidiarity, both theoretically and practically. "Other kinds of poverty, including material forms," Benedict argues, "are born from isolation," from "man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself," detaching himself from the love of his fellows and from the pursuit of objective truth. Though the common good aims at the flourishing of individual persons, the researches of social science, metaphysics, and theology demonstrate that man is a spiritual being whose personal identity grows in relation to others and to God. Hence the rights of men must be understood to exist within a framework of duties, without which such rights become destructive. In aiding impoverished peoples, for example, the goal must be to make them "artisans of their own destiny" by helping them to fulfill their obligations. This in turn requires a respect for the personal virtues and intermediary institutions such peoples may possess, or a willingness to foster them where they do not exist or are insufficient. True subsidiarity aims at the emancipation of the human person by empowering him to provide for himself and take responsibility for others. Current bureaucracies, whether domestic or international, tend to undermine the common good by emphasizing technology over character, uniformity over flexibility, and materialism (even hedonism) over the moral health of persons and institutions. Though global problems demand governing authority capable of directing globalization, such authority will be both ineffective and tyrannical if it does not embrace new and robustly subsidiary policies. Likewise, nations will not be able to support such authority unless they improve the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of their internal welfare systems by replacing centralized bureaucracy with the coordination of local efforts to secure the common good (*CV*, nos. 43–67).

### **Conclusion: Subsidiarity and Administrative Decentralization**

The outline above reveals a Catholic Magisterium that for well over a century has been promoting with increasing vigor the preservation of those institutions of associational life whose vitality Tocqueville described as essential to the liberty and happiness of modern man. The theoretical as well as practical parallels between these two sources will emerge yet more clearly through a brief comparison of the arguments in favor of such institutions contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*<sup>14</sup> to those of *Democracy in America*.

The Catholic principle of subsidiarity is rooted in a concept of human dignity resting on the notion that man is created in the image of

God. Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of Divine *Logos* or Reason, reveals to man his full potential, an indication of which is also discernable to reason in human nature itself. Man achieves beatitude through the perfection of his reason and will. With his reason, as perfected by wisdom (both natural and supernatural) and by faith, man understands the order of things established by the Creator. By the free choice of his will, aided also by natural and supernatural virtues, man directs himself toward the truth and goodness of this order. Due to the wounds of original sin, however, man's freedom becomes susceptible to perversions that tend to subvert his happiness. One must therefore distinguish between a genuine liberty in the service of the good and the just and a false liberty resulting in slavery to the wretchedness and misery of sin (*CCC*, nos. 1699–1739, 1803–1831, 1846–69).

Both the individual and society have a duty to combat false notions of liberty, but since the desired alternative is a personal virtue rooted in the rational apprehension and free choice of what is good, laws and institutions curtailing abuses of freedom must simultaneously preserve and promote the individual right to exercise a dignified liberty. Both social order and individual liberty well understood are therefore essential components of the common good (*CCC*, nos. 1738–42, 1905–1912). Rather than ignoring man's natural and divine calling or seeking to impose it despotically, political society—aided and guided by the Church—ought to provide a life-long education to citizens in truth and virtue, toward which those citizens ought to strive with all their power (*CCC*, nos. 1777–1794). This simultaneously personal and communal character of human dignity and perfection explains why assistance (*subsidium*) to individuals, families, and associations on the part of higher authorities is sometimes necessary, and also why it ought not be provided in ways that diminish or destroy their genuine liberty. Authority is therefore necessary, but compatible with human dignity only when it preserves and promotes a sphere of personal responsibility extending from the individual to the family, to the workplace, and to active participation in public life. (*CCC*, nos. 1877–1933)

Tocqueville considers religions from a purely human point of view (419). Yet he is struck by the “magnificent” harmony between the teaching of Christianity—that we must live in harmony with the order of things willed by God so that we may enjoy the happiness of contemplating it fully—and the aspirations of human nature, which is drawn to know and act in accordance with the architectonic idea of “God and human nature” (417–19, 504–5). Furthermore, Tocqueville concedes that, despite all the efforts of ancient philosophers, the Incarnation of Christ was necessary to render the idea of universal

human nature intelligible to mankind (413). Tocqueville therefore considers religion an indispensable means of instilling in citizens an awareness of and love for the superior part of man—his soul—which draws him to higher regions of thought and action, against the baser instincts that pull the human heart in the opposite direction (517–21).

For Tocqueville as well, virtue—understood as the apprehension of what is good by reason and its free choice by the will—is the source of whatever happiness man can achieve. As a result, only that liberty exercised in accordance with what is objectively just or good is genuinely worthy of the name (273, 431–37, 456, 504–9, 42). The limits of individual men render the struggle for virtue a matter of social concern; indeed, virtue is the proper focus of rights and an essential component of justice (403–418, 227, 240). Since virtue is ultimately a free choice of individuals, however, laws and institutions can neither directly mandate it, nor hope to achieve it perfectly (13). Instead, Tocqueville—like the Catholic Magisterium—bids legislators and all social leaders to seek virtue themselves, and to promote conditions favoring the *education* of citizens toward virtue (57, 262, 497, 517–21). Just as God directs the “infinite variety” of human actions “toward the accomplishment of one great design” rather than seeking to “force all men to march in the same march, toward the same object” (703), so too ought the human legislator avoid the temptation to achieve a fleeting and misconceived “perfection” in human affairs by means of a stifling centralization of administrative power (compare *CCC*, no. 1884). Administrative decentralization and subsidiarity have value and force precisely as indispensable means of achieving the shared goal of Tocqueville’s political science and Catholic social thought: the social promotion of man’s genuine and personal self-perfection.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Devin Schadt, Gary Glenn, Mary Keys, Ken Grasso, and Kevin Schmiesing for their comments and encouragement, and to the anonymous reviewers for *The Catholic Social Science Review*. A version of this article was presented at the 2010 meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists. In its research I profited greatly from the Society of Catholic Social Scientists' 2010 Summer Institute, conducted by Rev. Dr. Paul Sullins of The Catholic University of America, which I was able to attend due to the generous assistance of Paul Koch and Aron Aji of St. Ambrose University.
2. Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical references are to Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans., ed., and with an Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). I have occasionally made slight alterations to the translation.
3. John Schrems reads the 10th Amendment as mandating or at least recommending subsidiarity, which we shall see strongly resembles administrative decentralization (*Understanding Principles of Politics and the State*, Revised Edition [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007], 218). Gary W. Vause argues that the 10th Amendment is inadequate for this purpose ("The Subsidiary Principle in European Law—American Federalism Compared," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* [27:1, 1995], part iii).
4. The centrality of administrative decentralization in Tocqueville's political science can be seen in his treatment of it as a source of some of democracy's greatest goods (82-93), and as a guard against one of its greatest dangers (250-51).
5. Parenthetical references to Church documents begin with an abbreviation of their title (often in Latin) and then provide the standard paragraph numbers. All papal documents cited can be found at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), and most can be found in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.
6. Russel Hittinger demonstrates that the doctrine of subsidiarity is rooted in the prior concept of *munera* or gifts comprising a divine commission to individuals and groups encompassing both rights and duties with respect to elements of the common good ("Social Pluralism and Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Doctrine," in *Christianity and Civil Society: Catholic and Neo-Calvinist Perspectives*, edited by Jeanne Heffernan Schindler [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008]).
7. This harmony is also noted by Wolfe, "Subsidiarity," in *Christianity and Civil Society*.

8. See the famous numbers 10 and 51.
9. See Philip Harold, "Robert Nisbet's Visible and Invisible Communities," *The Catholic Social Science Review* (XV, 2010), for an emphasis on this dimension of Tocqueville's thought.
10. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to England and Ireland*, trans. by George Lawrence, ed. by J. P. Mayer (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1957), 117.
11. On this theme, see L. Joseph Hebert, Jr., "The Catholic Church in the Modern World: A Tocquevillian Analysis of Vatican II," in *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship*.
12. For helpful treatments of Tocqueville's discussion of American women, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Women, Equality, and the Family," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 1 (2000); William Kristol, "Women's Liberation: The Relevance of Tocqueville," in *Interpreting Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. by Ken Masugi (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991); and Delba Winthrop, "Tocqueville's American Woman and 'The True Conception of Democratic Progress,'" *Political Theory* 14, no. 3 (1986).
13. I am indebted for this framework to the insights of Stephen Krason and Christopher Shannon at the aforementioned Summer Institute of Catholic Social Thought.
14. Excellent scholarly accounts of the premises of subsidiarity include Wolfe, "Subsidiarity"; Hittinger, "Social Pluralism and Subsidiarity"; and Kenneth Grasso, "The Subsidiary State: Society, the State and the Principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Thought," in *Christianity and Civil Society*.

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*PART III*  
*BOOK REVIEWS*

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