

# **Aristotle and John Paul II on the Family and Society: A Reply to John Hittinger**

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*Despite their differences, Aristotle and John Paul II are not at odds in their accounts of the person, family and society. Guided by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Christian political theology must move beyond Aristotle, but it need not reject him. Indeed, Aristotle's political philosophy provides much-needed resources of reason for defending the dignity of the person and the value of the family in the modern world.*

I would like to thank Professor Hittinger for his thought-provoking paper and the Institute for Saint Anselm Studies for the opportunity to carry the discussion forward.

The question before us is this: on what resources can a Catholic political theology draw to defend the dignity of the human person and the value of the family in our modern world? According to Professor Hittinger, we must be especially concerned with the family because, in modern societies, the family seems the only place in which the human person is accepted and affirmed in his or her uniqueness and unrepeatability, in his or her personal dignity. Whereas in the broader society and economy persons are treated as dispensable or replaceable and personal facts as mere statistics, the family ““is a profoundly human system, constructed upon the value of the person and concentrated entirely around this value.””<sup>1</sup> Hence, to foster a high esteem for the family as a communion of persons may well be the only way to resist the dehumanizing trends of our times. Only the family, it seems, can save us from the deformations of our politics.

Professor Hittinger cites Blessed John Paul II on the problem and its solution:

. . . faced with a society that is running the risk of becoming more and more depersonalized and standardized and therefore inhuman and dehumanizing . . . , the family possesses and continues still to release formidable energies capable of taking man out of his anonymity, keeping him conscious of his personal dignity, enriching him with deep humanity and actively placing him, in his uniqueness and unrepeatability, within the fabric of society.<sup>2</sup>

The family, then, is the primary personalizing and humanizing force in our modern world and therefore the principal bulwark against those “despotisms old and new which seek their goal by means of a reduction of human beings to faceless rational integers, to units whose only dignity is that of the function they perform.”<sup>3</sup> We must, therefore, resist any account of the human things

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<sup>1</sup> John Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 8.2 (Spring 2013), 20, citing Karol Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons,” in *Persons and Community: Selected Essays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Keefe, “Liberation and the Catholic Church: The Illusion and the Reality,” *Center Journal* (Winter 1981), 57, cited by Professor Hittinger throughout his lecture.

that devalues the family or denies the singular dignity of the persons who compose it.

Principal among such accounts, according to Hittinger, are the “ideologies of liberal progressivism and Marxist socialism” which see in the family “an obstacle to progress and the full realization of a just political society.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise inimical is the political philosophy of Plato, who “eliminates the family in attempting to appropriate its naturalness” for the city.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, however, even the political philosophy of Aristotle—traditionally “an important resource” for those who have sought to understand and “to combat the errors and distortions” of modernity—must be rejected. For “Aristotle does not adequately establish the significance of the individual and the goodness of marriage and family. The superiority and sovereignty of the political regime overshadow the family.”<sup>6</sup> Aristotle “projects a perfect society or a self-sufficient association”—the city—“whose end or purpose subverts the fundamental significance of the family.”<sup>7</sup> The family is devalued, by being subordinated to the city and its purposes.

Even at its best, then, philosophy—or pagan philosophy—fails to establish the significance of the individual and the goodness of the family. Rather, in one way or another, it ultimately denies or subverts them. Instead of relying upon pagan wisdom, then, we must turn to theology, more particularly, to the Christian personalism of Blessed John Paul II. “The ultimate justification or true basis for the understanding and practice of love as the disinterested gift of self”—and therefore of marriage and sociality—must be “theological.”<sup>8</sup>

Now, I agree with Professor Hittinger that the principles of a Catholic political theology—if it is to be a theology—must be drawn from the mysteries of the faith and the realities of Christian life. To rely exclusively on the wisdom of Aristotle will certainly bring us up short. But this is not because Aristotle ultimately undermines the value of the family and the significance of the individual. If that were the case, his supposed wisdom would be no wisdom at all. It is rather because his wisdom, however true, is but human and because we have available to us, through faith, a wisdom more than human, the wisdom of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught, and as Blessed John Paul II never tired of repeating,

The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. . . . Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.<sup>9</sup>

From the revelation of God in Jesus Christ we learn the truth of our destiny and so of our dignity: that we are called to share in the very life of God; that we are called to become members of the

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<sup>4</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 1.

<sup>5</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 3.

<sup>6</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 2.

<sup>7</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22

household of God, as adopted sons in the only-begotten Son. We learn to call God our Father and our fellow men brothers in a hitherto inconceivable way. We learn that marriage is not only a human reality but a sacrament—a sign of a sacred reality, the love of Christ for his Church.

So, in considering the dignity of the person and the significance of marriage and the family, philosophy in general and Aristotle in particular, do bring us up short. But is it true that Aristotle's teaching on the primacy of the city subverts these truths? Does he "lose the significance of the differentiated individual and the importance of the family"?<sup>10</sup> Must we, therefore, turn away from Aristotle—on these questions at least—to embrace the insights of Christian personalism?

I will argue that we need not, that we are not forced to choose between Aristotle and Blessed John Paul. Their accounts are not contradictory, but consistent and even complementary. I will further argue that we need Aristotle's account of the city, precisely in order to resist the depersonalizing, dehumanizing tendencies of modern politics.

What is at issue between the philosophical wisdom of Aristotle and the theological wisdom of John Paul II? On what do they differ and why does it matter? They do not, I would argue, differ in their estimation of the dignity of the human person. According to John Paul II, the person exists for himself, as an end in himself, and never as a means. For Aristotle, too, the free man—who is master of himself because able to direct himself knowingly to the good—exists for his own sake, that is, to possess and enjoy the good and not to be used by another for his good.<sup>11</sup> Despite their terminological differences, they do not, I think, differ fundamentally in their account of love. For John Paul II, love is the disinterested gift of self. For Aristotle, friendship is wanting the good of one's friend for his sake. A friend is another self and the love of friendship a kind of self-communication—as I love myself, wishing myself good for my own sake, so I love my friend.<sup>12</sup>

According to Professor Hitinger, they disagree in their accounts of the root of human sociability. For John Paul, society arises from the generosity of persons, from their fundamental capacity to give themselves. Aristotle, by contrast, "did not make explicit the theme of generosity and gift." Instead, his analysis "turn[s] more on the necessity of social and political association and indicate[s] the neediness of human nature."<sup>13</sup> This is a danger, says Hitinger, for "when nature can be transformed, or needs redefined or met through various [other] arrangements, the role of the family is questioned and the political order made utilitarian."<sup>14</sup> But it would be strange for Aristotle, who held that man is by nature political, to ground society only in the needs of individuals, who associate only because each is unable to provide for himself. For in that case, social life would be nothing but a means—and one at least in principle dispensable—to the satisfaction of individual needs. There would be no goods of association as

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<sup>10</sup> Hitinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 17.

<sup>11</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics* I.5; *Metaphysics* I.2; *Politics* III.6.

<sup>12</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.4.

<sup>13</sup> Hitinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 18.

<sup>14</sup> Hitinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 19.

such.

Given that they differ concerning the root of sociability, they also differ in their respective accounts of what society is. For John Paul II, society is interpersonal loving communion, “the disinterested gift of self and the reception of the gift,”<sup>15</sup> while for Aristotle, a society is a community of persons aiming at some common good. But to get to the crux of the matter, they seem to differ greatly in their estimation of the value of marriage and the family. According to John Paul II, marriage “is the perfect realization” of interpersonal communion. The family, founded upon marriage, embodies “the animating principle of society [as such], ‘the law of free-giving’” and so serves “as an ‘example and stimulus for broader community relationships.’”<sup>16</sup> For Aristotle, on the other hand, the family is an imperfect society devoted to the provision of daily needs, which must be ordered to the city for its completion.<sup>17</sup>

Let us examine the reasons for these differences. The reasons for John Paul’s esteem for marriage and the family are clearly theological:

God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, He called him at the same time for love. God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.<sup>18</sup>

Human beings have been created in love, for love. To love—to give oneself without reserve—is to imitate God. Spousal love—in its totality, exclusivity, indissolubility and fruitfulness—is an image of the love of God and the communion of persons consequent upon it an image of the Trinity, of the God who is love. John Paul II tends to consider the gift of self without reserve, wherever it is found, as spousal; and the communion of persons founded on such love as an image of the Trinity. The reason for John Paul’s esteem of marriage and the family, then, is their value as signs of the love of God which is the origin and end of all things. What he esteems above all is charity, or in his terms, the perfect gift of self, because it is a likeness of and participation in the very life and love of God. Spousal love, therefore, is a sacrament—a sign of a sacred reality.

Aristotle’s analysis of society begins from the perspective of the human agent, who always acts for the sake of some good.<sup>19</sup> Since associating with others is something that human beings do, they must do it for the sake of some good.<sup>20</sup> But not all goods of human beings are

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<sup>15</sup> Hitinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 21.

<sup>16</sup> Hitinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> See *Politics* I.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 11.

<sup>19</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1.

<sup>20</sup> See *Politics* I.1.

goods that meet individual needs. Not all goods are private goods, things good for one to the exclusion of others. Rather, some goods are such that they can only be possessed by many—like conversation between friends—or can be shared by many without loss to any—like the truths friends share in conversation.

Some of the goods for the sake of which human beings associate are private goods; some are common in either of the above two senses. Among those goods, the common goods are always the better, both in themselves and for those who enjoy them. Because they are more communicable, they are more abundantly good.<sup>21</sup> A common good is always a good of those who associate, but it belongs to them not as individuals but as associates. The common good of any community is the good sought by members of that community, as members of that community, for members of that community. Hence, one who is excluded from participation in the common good of a given community is properly speaking no member of that community.<sup>22</sup>

Everything that human beings do, they do ultimately for the sake of happiness.<sup>23</sup> Hence happiness is the ultimate end of human association. The happy life for a human being is the life of virtue, suitably equipped so as to be able to perform the deeds of virtue.<sup>24</sup> That community in which the happy life can be lived Aristotle calls the perfect community, the city.<sup>25</sup> And the end of every well-governed city is the happiness of its citizens. A city is well-governed when those who rule direct the city to the common advantage of the citizens. A city is ill-governed when those who rule direct the city to their private advantage. All such regimes are despotic—the rule of a master over slaves, who are used for the master’s good—whereas the city is a community of free persons, who exist for their own good.<sup>26</sup>

Human beings can only secure the conditions for living well—the goods of peace, prosperity, leisure—through cooperation with others in a variety of communities. But beyond these conditions, living well itself requires participating in a variety of common goods proper to diverse communities. In marriage there are the common goods of mutual support and of children. The former involves mutual assistance in providing for the needs of each; but that spouses do so faithfully and fairly is a common good beyond the goods they secure through their common action. The latter involves the parents’ cooperating in generating new life. We can say that they need each other for this work; but they do not engage in it to satisfy any need of theirs. Through their cooperation, the parents communicate a good they possess—the good of being human—to another, the child. The natural desire to generate is a desire to communicate being—the good of the species—and is a participation in the generosity of nature.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> On the communicability of the common good as a reason for its superiority, see Charles De Koninck, “The Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists,” *Aquinas Review*, Vol. 4, (1997).

<sup>22</sup> See *Politics* VII.8.

<sup>23</sup> See *Nicomachean Ethics* I.4.

<sup>24</sup> See *Politics* VII.1.

<sup>25</sup> See *Politics* I.1.

<sup>26</sup> See *Politics* III.6.

<sup>27</sup> See *De Anima* II.4.

In the city, there are the common goods of peace and justice, in all their facets—security against enemies within and without, a just allocation of the burdens and benefits of citizenship, just political institutions and laws, etc. But there are also extrinsic common goods toward which the citizens direct their common action. Since the city exists for the happiness of its citizens, these extrinsic common goods must be goods the enjoyment of which constitutes their happiness. A healthy politics requires that the city as a whole—that is, the community of citizens—order itself toward the pursuit of those goods worth seeking for their own sake—goods of the mind, broadly conceived.<sup>28</sup> If a city is to be happy, it must enjoy leisure, and know how to make use of it.<sup>29</sup>

On Aristotle's account, the city is the perfect community because the city makes possible the happy life of its members. Since happiness is the end of human life, the city is the end of the other forms of association, including the family.<sup>30</sup> The family is the place of generation, nurture and the education of new life. But the family alone is not adequate to its tasks of nurture and education—neither to preserving nor especially to perfecting its members. In order to attain its end, the family must associate with other families in the city. This means that only in the city can the members of families—or at least some of them—attain their final end. The life of the family is not the simply happy life for its members; and its members participate in the happy life not as members of the family, but as members of the political community.

The ordination of the family to the city in no way implies that the city—or those who rule in it—can use the family for purposes alien to its members. A city that treats the families of its citizens as a “breeding ground”<sup>31</sup> providing matter for its pursuit of glory is a despotically governed city. But Aristotle's teaching does entail that the goods of family life are not the sole nor even the highest goods in which the members of the family are called to participate.

Would John Paul II disagree? Does the introduction of what we learn from revelation subvert the primacy of the city and establish the primacy of the family?

I would argue that it does not. Even within the Christian dispensation, the family remains an imperfect society, needing to direct itself toward other more encompassing communities for the good of its members.<sup>32</sup> All Christians are called beyond the family to citizenship, in various earthly cities and in the one *Civitas Dei*. They are called to participate in goods beyond those of family life and so to extend their love to the members of those communities whose goods they are. The highest of these goods—God himself as the happiness of the blessed—is the common good upon which is founded the universal society that is the Church. But there are lesser

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<sup>28</sup> See *Politics* VIII.3.

<sup>29</sup> See *Politics* VII.14

<sup>30</sup> See *Politics* I.2

<sup>31</sup> Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 15.

<sup>32</sup> “[T]he family is an imperfect society, since it has not in itself all the means for its own complete development; whereas civil society is a perfect society, having in itself all the means for its peculiar end, which is the temporal well-being of the community; and so, in this respect, that is, in view of the common good, it has pre-eminence over the family, which finds its own suitable temporal perfection precisely in civil society” (Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, n. 12).

common goods which ground other earthly communities. Even within the Christian dispensation, then, the common goods of family life are not the sole nor the highest goods of family members. We should not allow our esteem for marriage as a sign to overshadow our awareness of the genuine limits of family life.

Moreover, we don't need to deny the imperfection of the family—its inability to provide all that its members need to live well—in order to appreciate it as “the cradle of life and love.” What John Paul II values in the family is the self-giving love of its members. And we take nothing away from that love when we point out the imperfection of the family. In the same way, we don't need to disparage the city and other more perfect societies in order to appreciate the family as a communion of persons united by self-giving love.

Aristotle's account of the family and society is limited, not because he considers the family an imperfect community, but because he knows only that earthly happiness connatural to us, a happiness that consists in our attaining through virtuous activity those goods proportionate to our nature, and not the happiness of faith, hope and charity, whereby we share, albeit imperfectly, in the very life of God, the perfect good. For this reason, he knows marriage and the family only as a form of friendship that involves communication in the goods of everyday life, and not as sign of God's love for us in Christ. Likewise, he knows the city alone as a perfect community, and not the Church as a society self-sufficient with a view to the eternal salvation of all men.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, I do think we need a true account of the city and its purposes to combat the depersonalizing, dehumanizing tendencies of our time. We need to challenge the errors and injustice of our despotic politics directly, with properly political arguments. Our politics does not need to become more familial—at least, not in the first place. It needs to become more political—that is, more just. The tyranny that Professor Hittinger fears is, at bottom, despotic rule—the rule over the free by the rule proper to slaves. The most basic principle of Aristotle's classification of regimes into those that are deviant or unjust and those that are correct or just is whether those who rule seek the common good of the citizens or their own private good. The deviant regimes are all deviant because they are despotic, whereas the city is a community of free persons, who exist for their own sake.<sup>34</sup>

Precisely in the Aristotelian teaching on the common good there are resources of reason for the Catholic political theologian seeking to understand and defend the dignity of the person and the value of the family. These resources are indeed imperfect, and they are by no means sufficient, but they are genuine resources nonetheless.

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<sup>33</sup> See *Divini Illius Magistri*, n. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See *Politics* III.6