

9: SUBSIDIARITY AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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The American concept of democracy is based on having a government of, by, and for the people. It is rooted in individual freedom, equal rights protected by law, and a government of limited powers elected by the populace. If this approach is to work and be sustained, it requires social cooperation, a public ethic under which people do not usurp the legitimate rights of others, and checks and balances so that power is not aggregated into a single source.

Those who signed the Constitution were very conscious of the abuse of power and wanted to limit that of the central government. They did so in two ways. First, they divided the federal government into three coequal branches, each with distinct responsibilities and authority. Second, they checked the centralization of authority by creating a Bill of Rights which limits the powers of the government to those enumerated in the Constitution, and reserves to the States or the people those powers not so delegated.

The voice of the people is most effective when there is a pluralism of institutions that are intermediate between the nation and the individual. If mediating institutions do not exist, or are not active in opposing the centralizing impulse of government, there is a tendency for authority to increasingly become centralized and for the governing power to become monistic and juridically omnipotent. This is most likely to occur when societal needs arise that cannot be adequately be met by individuals. The government then takes upon itself the responsibility to satisfy those needs, becoming paternalistic and seeing that all of an individual's needs, as it defines them, are met. This in essence is the Welfare State, which is the antithesis of limited government and a threat to personal freedom.

In the encyclical, *Centimus Annus* (1991), Pope John Paul II described the effects of the Welfare State as leading “to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for their clients and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.”

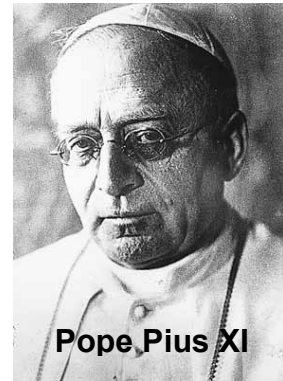
Alexis de Tocqueville also warned against the tendency to create a benevolent, but all-powerful state:

”For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances: what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?”

The antidote to an all-powerful, central government is subsidiarity, that is, the decentralization and devolving of authority and responsibility. This principle, which is central to Catholic social thought, holds that nothing should be done by a larger and more complex organization that can be done as well by a smaller and simpler organization. These smaller, intermediate groups, which include local communities, private organizations, labor unions, professional societies, associations of all types, church, and family, among others, operate within the state and assist in meeting the needs of society. They maintain, however, their own autonomy and identity without the state infringing on their ends.

Subsidiarity is based on the autonomy and dignity of the individual. It holds that organizational structures in society, from the family to the community to the state to the nation to the international order should all be in the service of the human person. They should exist to help the person work out his existence as a creature of God.

The principle of subsidiarity was advanced by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), to establish a balanced position between the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism and the various forms of socialism which subordinate the individual to the state. The concept was developed further by Pope Pius XI, who stated in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931):



“Just as it is generally wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also is it an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what less and subordinate organizations can do.”

It was further discussed by Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961), and by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

Thus, the principle of subsidiarity, which is key to limited government and personal freedom, is a fundamental concept both in founding American political thought and in Catholic social teaching. Subsidiarity fosters the conditions for a society that allows individuals to exercise their free wills, develop their capacities, and fulfill their God-given responsibilities.