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Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP: A Dominican Faces Modernity

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Introduction

My task is to consider the thought of one important Dominican who wrote in the modern era, in the wake of the various Enlightenments and the aftermath of the French Revolution. The life and writings of Father Henri-Dominique Lacordaire reflect all the dramas of Catholicism's ongoing, difficult, but inescapable engagement with societies shaped by the movements of ideas that emerged in the eighteenth century and transformed the world—for better and for worse. Some of these ideas resulted in positive developments such as the abolition of hereditary privileges. Other ideas associated with the same movements, however, brought many people to the guillotine.

There is much that could be said about Father Lacordaire. This might include the reasons for his abandonment of the doctrines of Rousseau and his return to the Catholic faith as a young man.[1] Another subject worthy of an entire address would be Lacordaire's famous Lenten lectures.[2] These exercises in apologetics drew thousands of people to Notre Dame in Paris, facilitated a revival in homiletics, and led to Lacordaire being described as one of the greatest orators of the nineteenth century.

Among Dominicans, Lacordaire is perhaps most famous for taking the initiative to reestablish the Dominican order in France. In that regard, it is revealing that when Lacordaire wrote about this in the newspaper *L'Univers*, he made a point of stating that the democratic, bottom-up governance traditions of Dominican orders accorded with the spirit of the French Revolution.[3]

At the time, this was a controversial statement for a French Catholic to make. Many Catholics, with good reason, associated the French Revolution with hostility to Christianity, with the theft of church property by Revolutionary governments in the 1790s, the closure of monasteries and convents, the expulsion of religious orders, and the widespread persecution and killing of Catholic clergy following the promulgation of the *Constitution civile du clergé* in 1790. All these things and more—again, with good reason—were associated by Catholics with the modern spirit of liberty.

Ancient Faith and Modern Liberty

How did Lacordaire, as a Catholic and Dominican priest, engage with this post-Revolutionary world? Perhaps it was Lacordaire's decidedly nonclerical family background—he came from a family of middle-class lawyers, naval officers, and scientists—but his entire adult life was marked by an effort to bring the truths of the Catholic faith into some type of positive contact with the new ideas which proliferated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

To Lacordaire's mind, there was no going back to a pre-Revolutionary world. He also thought that the post-Revolutionary world provided a context in which the Church could shed political and institutional associations that undermined the Church's ability to evangelize.

One of Lacordaire's first appointments after his ordination as a diocesan priest in Paris was to serve as a chaplain at one of Paris's most famous government schools: the Lycée Henri-IV. The experience led Lacordaire to conclude that public education was fueling the de-Christianization of France. It was consequently better, he argued, for the Church to have its own schools—schools that he thought should be completely free of government supervision and government money. For the same reason, Lacordaire believed that Catholic clergy should refuse the state salaries to which they were entitled under law. In 1830, Lacordaire argued that these salaries allowed Catholic clergy to be "preyed upon by our enemies, by those who regard us as hypocrites or as imbeciles, and by those who are persuaded that our life depends on money."[4]

At this point, it is worth noting that relations between the Church and the French state were governed during Lacordaire's lifetime by the concordat negotiated by Napoleon and Pius VII in 1801. The concordat had restored the French church's unity with Rome. It also acknowledged that questions of faith and morals were outside the state's authority. But the concordat also conceded great control over the Church's institutional life to the French government. This was not a coincidence. As Napoleon reportedly remarked to his brother Lucien Bonaparte,

"Skillful conquerors have not got entangled with priests. They can both contain them and use them."[5] The concordat—and the considerable control that it gave Napoleon's regime over Church affairs—was maintained in place during the First Empire, the restored Bourbon Monarchy, the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, and the Third Republic, before eventually being unilaterally repudiated by the French government in 1905 with its law on the separation of church and state.

Lacordaire's alternative to the concordat is perhaps best summarized in the expression "a free church in a free state."[6] Lacordaire understood very well that it is impossible to separate religion from politics completely. But he also believed that the type of association between church and state that prevailed throughout most of nineteenth-century Europe was positively harmful to the Church's freedom and its ability to spread the gospel. He especially noticed how state financing of the church made many bishops and clergy deeply servile to government officials and their political, even philosophical, priorities, rather than the priorities of the Church.

Lacordaire's proposals to eliminate these arrangements made him unpopular with many in the Church. In the first place, they displeased those many bishops and clerics who were happy to be on the state payroll. Lacordaire's point, however, was that state financial support of the Church, whether direct or indirect, had very negative side-effects upon the life of the Church, such as burdening the Church with institutions that had become devoid of any actual faith content. That insight is surely of great relevance to the Church in many countries today.

Another group displeased by Lacordaire's proposals for reform of church-state relations were those French bishops who maintained a Gallican view of relations between national churches and Rome—the belief that the pope's authority over the church in a given country should be limited by not only the authority of that country's bishops but also the civil authorities of that same country. Those French bishops with Gallican views were unhappy with Lacordaire because the free Church envisaged by Lacordaire was also a Church committed to ultramontane views of papal authority. For Lacordaire was not just a strong advocate of the Church's liberty. He was an unabashed ultramontane.

Ultramontanism began as part of a movement to free Catholic churches from the control of civil authorities by attaching churches more closely to the pope. Lacordaire's ultramontanism subsequently put him at odds with important figures such as his own bishop, Archbishop de Quélen of Paris, who maintained strongly Gallican views.

On the other hand, Lacordaire's "free state," by which he meant one in which the state limited itself to ensuring freedom of religion, led to clashes with another

set of Catholics. These were those Catholics in France and Rome who associated—for good reasons—the idea of religious liberty with what we would call doctrinaire secularism. These Catholics were aware that the French Revolution's conception of religious liberty amounted to the relegation of religion to the purely private sphere and the realm of mere opinion and subjective preference. This explains much of the hostility with which Lacordaire's initial forays into rethinking religious liberty issues were met by many in Rome.

Echoes of Lacordaire in Vatican II

In that regard, it is striking to see the degree of compatibility between some of Lacordaire's propositions and those articulated in Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*). The strongest similarity is that neither *Dignitatis Humanae* nor Lacordaire's thinking about religious liberty makes any concessions to religious indifferentism or relativism. Both insist that the fullness of religious truth is to be found in the Catholic Church. The most marked difference between *Dignitatis Humanae* and Lacordaire is that Lacordaire insisted on a sharper institutional separation between church and state. By contrast, the expression "separation of church and state" does not appear in *Dignitatis Humanae*.

We do, however, see a stronger parallel between Lacordaire's views and the teaching of Vatican II on the order of bishops. Under the terms of the 1801 Concordat, the French state continued to control the nomination of Catholic bishops in France. The pope then either confirmed or rejected the nomination.

In Lacordaire's view, this practice needed to be terminated if the church was to be truly free. At the time, this was a somewhat radical proposal. Many Catholics simply accepted this practice as normal and even many non-Catholic governments insisted that they had a role in the appointment of Catholic bishops. In its 1965 Decree *Christus Dominus*, however, Vatican II adopted a position that accords very much with Lacordaire's views on this subject. *Christus Dominus* teaches:

> Therefore, for the purpose of duly protecting the freedom of the Church and of promoting more conveniently and efficiently the welfare of the faithful, this holy council desires that in future no more rights or privileges of election, nomination, presentation, or designation for the office of bishop be granted to civil authorities. The civil authorities, on the other hand, whose favorable attitude toward the Church the sacred synod gratefully acknowledges and highly appreciates, are most kindly requested voluntarily to renounce the above-mentioned rights and privileges which they presently enjoy by reason of a treaty or custom, after discussing the matter with the Apostolic See.[7]

This quotation demonstrates that, on the question of whether governments should have a role in the selection and appointment of bishops, Vatican II and Lacordaire are at one.

Lacordaire, Tocqueville, and the American Tradition of Liberty

In many ways, however, Lacordaire's forays into the subject of the right relationship between church and state were a proxy for his wider concern: the relationship between, on the one hand, the world of religion, of Christianity, of Catholicism, and, on the other, the world that had emerged in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that laid a particular stress upon freedom. A desire to realize a productive relationship between these worlds was shared by some nineteenth-century Catholic intellectuals such as Lacordaire's friend and collaborator Charles de Montalembert but perhaps most famously Alexis de Tocqueville.

Tocqueville and Lacordaire knew each other very well. Following the 1848 Revolution, for example, both were elected members of the Second Republic's Constituent Assembly. During this time, Tocqueville belonged to *le Partie d'Ordre* (the party of order), which consisted of royalists and conservative republicans. In his *Recollections* of the 1848 Revolution, Tocqueville stated he was disturbed by Lacordaire's decision to sit, wearing his full Dominican habit, among the Jacobin members of the Assembly—that is, among the Assembly's most extreme left and violently anti-Catholic members. On the other hand, both Tocqueville and Lacordaire opposed the newly emerging socialist movement as well as Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état of 1851 and the subsequent installation of an authoritarian regime.

There seems, however, to be something providential about the fact that when Tocqueville died in 1859, Lacordaire was appointed to Tocqueville's seat in *L'Académie française*. Even today, it remains the custom that the eulogy of a deceased member of *Les Immortels* is made by his or her successor.

Delivered in 1861, Lacordaire's nine-thousand-word address represents one of the best analyses ever penned on the thought of Tocqueville.[8] The rest of this article will explicate some of the most important and most currently relevant observations that Lacordaire made in this speech. There are three such observations that merit our attention.

First, Lacordaire underscored the ways in which Tocqueville believed the relationship between Christianity and the modern world of liberty had gone wrong. He singles out Tocqueville's belief that much of the spirit of liberty,

especially in Continental Europe, was "infected," to use Lacordaire's word, with philosophical and religious skepticism.

That is important, Lacordaire observes, because it raises the possibility that Catholics might be able to embrace many of the institutions associated with commitments to freedom *if* the same institutions purged themselves of skepticism. At the same time, Lacordaire argues that a skepticism-free liberalism might be less inclined to instinctive anti-Catholicism and better able to recognize some of the ways in which Christianity, with its belief in a rational God, had helped advance the project of freedom over the centuries.

The second of Tocqueville's observations underlined by Lacordaire was how Tocqueville's most famous book, *Democracy in America*, had highlighted the problem of reconciling liberty with equality in the modern world. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville stressed that democracy's emphasis upon equality was becoming a threat to liberty.[9] These worries on Tocqueville's part may have been further solidified by his experience of the socialist uprisings in Paris in June 1848: an uprising led by men who wanted to see an economic leveling of society, including, in some cases, the outright abolition of private property.

In his eulogy of Tocqueville, Lacordaire also underscored the dangers associated with the desire to realize "*l'égalité absolue des conditions*," the absolute equality of conditions.[10] If anything, Lacordaire's critique of modern tendencies to understand equality as the leveling of all social, political, and economic differences is even stronger than Tocqueville's. It led not only to what Lacordaire called decadence, by which he seems to mean a society in which everyone is equally mediocre, but it also encouraged demagoguery on the part of those who desired even more leveling and legitimized efforts to use the state to try to secure the complete economic security of everyone. This, Tocqueville and Lacordaire stated, inevitably resulted in the destruction of freedom for everyone.

But from Tocqueville, Lacordaire also drew the conclusion that the case of America showed that equality and liberty need not be at odds. In America, Lacordaire stated, Christianity was free from the type of attachments to the state which existed between religion and government throughout Europe. That had liberated Christianity to play a major role in reconciling aspirations to equality and the yearning for liberty. In America, Lacordaire observed, Christianity remained the primary source of the type of virtues that led people to use their liberty responsibly. Such responsibility included using their freedom to help those who faced economic hardship rather than abandoning that responsibility to the state.

More fundamentally, Lacordaire pointed out, Christianity in America expressed conceptions of liberty and equality that were not at odds with each other. Christianity had helped to create a particular spirit of liberty in America, one

very different to the spirit of the French Revolution. Lacordaire summarizes this American spirit of liberty in four concise sentences. "(1) The American spirit is religious. (2) It has an inner respect for the law. (3) It values liberty as much as equality. (4) It regards civil liberty as the first foundation for political liberty."[11]

These four principles, Lacordaire believed, had allowed Christianity in America to harmonize liberty and equality. They prevented liberty from collapsing into hyper-individualism because Christianity links freedom with duty. This was why the type of free associations in America that helped those in need were almost always religious. In doing so, Christianity helped preempt pressures to use the state to resolve such problems, thus ensuring that concerns for equality did not degenerate into an ideology of egalitarianism.

The third lesson that Lacordaire drew from Tocqueville is that just as the roots of liberty lie deep in history, so too do the roots of despotism and arbitrary power. In the latter part of his eulogy of Tocqueville, Lacordaire points out that while the French Revolution expressed deep-seated yearnings for freedom from absolutism—yearnings that in turn arose from Christian and Enlightenment sources—the Revolution also quickly developed into a form of tyranny and lawlessness.

The reason for this, Lacordaire surmises, is that the trend to state centralization had been in place in France for more than 150 years before the Revolution. Here Lacordaire drew explicitly upon Tocqueville's *L'ancien régime et la Révolution*: a text that was then, and is now, far less known than Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

According to Lacordaire, Tocqueville had shown that the ability of a society to maintain its freedom was heavily dependent on the type of institutions and social habits that prevailed. In the case of France, Lacordaire wrote, complaints about the *ancien régime* had paradoxically gone hand in hand with a deep deference to the state. That created conditions in which France found it hard to avoid further centralizations of power, despite the Revolution's emphasis on liberty.

By contrast, Lacordaire observed, the spirit of liberty in America was accompanied by deeply ingrained habits of free association. These went back to the British colonial period but also the existence of churches and synagogues that had kept their distance from state institutions. These not only limited state power, they also meant that Americans were less likely to look to the state to solve their problems.

It is worth remembering that when Lacordaire delivered his eulogy of Tocqueville to the *Académie française* in 1861, it was in the conditions of the relatively authoritarian regime of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte. At the time, basic civil and political freedoms remained limited. Indeed, many Catholic bishops were quite content with the regime. Lacordaire himself had, like Tocqueville,

completely withdrawn from political life after Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état of 1851. Lacordaire died in November 1861, less than ten months after he delivered his eulogy of Tocqueville.

Conclusion: *Dieu et la Liberté!*

There is a remarkable consistency about Lacordaire that followed from his return to the Catholic faith as a young man: a consistency that became even more apparent once he became a Dominican. That consistency can be summed up in the four-word motto for the newspaper *L'Avenir*, which Lacordaire helped to found in 1830 as a young diocesan priest. Those four words were *Dieu et la Liberté!* God and Freedom!

For Lacordaire, a society that had God but was not free—*Dieu sans la liberté*—such as pre-Revolutionary France, was a society in which servility and despotism would prevail. But a society that had liberty but which marginalized God—*la liberté sans Dieu*—such as Revolutionary France, was a society in which decadence and despotism would prevail.

Perhaps most importantly, Lacordaire believed that the only Christianity capable of undergirding a free modern society was a Christianity that believed that there is truth and that we can know it; a Christianity characterized by clarity about what it believed; a Church that was fearless in preaching its beliefs; a Christianity that took reason seriously when explaining those beliefs; and a Church that never compromised those beliefs by trading in ambiguity. For Lacordaire, a Christianity that did none of these things was neither being true to itself, nor much help to free societies, nor likely to be of interest to anyone concerned about truth. But for Lacordaire, a Christianity that did all these things—and more—was a Christianity capable of revealing the full potential of human freedom and the ultimate source from which this liberty comes. Preaching that Christianity in and to the modern world was, by Lacordaire's account, the only Christianity worth preaching, the only Christianity that could lend direction to freedom, and the only Christianity fully consistent with the Dominican tradition.

Notes

1. See Anne Philibert, *Henri Lacordaire* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2016).
2. The Lenten lectures can be found in Rev. Père Lacordaire, *Conferences*, trans. Henry Langdon (New York: P. O'Shea, 1870).
3. See Guy Bedouelle, OP, "Lacordaire et le rétablissement de l'ordre dominicain en France," *Lumière et vie*, vol. LX (2011), 79.
4. *L'Avenir* (1830), as quoted in G. P. Gooch, *French Profiles: Prophets and Pioneers* (London: Longmans, 1961), 218.
5. Nigel Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, c. 1750–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 255.
6. The original utterance of the phrase is generally attributed to Montalembert in his Mechlin Address of 1863, though Orestes Brownson wrote a similar phrase in 1853. See Max Longley, *For the Union and the Catholic Church: Four Converts in the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2015), 86 and 234. The phrase was later echoed by many figures in various contexts including Cavour in Italy, Kuyper in The Netherlands, and Baptists in the United States.
7. Second Vatican Council, Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*), 1965, no. 20, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html.
8. Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP, "Discours de réception de Henri Lacordaire, prononcé dans la séance publique du 24 janvier 1861, en venant prendre séance à la place de M. de Tocqueville," http://www.academie-francaise.fr/discours-de-reception-de-henri-lacordaire.
9. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 872–78.
10. Lacordaire, "Discours de réception de Henri Lacordaire."
11. Lacordaire, "Discours de réception de Henri Lacordaire."