

Response to David Dault

by

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David is saying much in his brief paper: he begins by lamenting the impossibility of true martyrdom in today's political milieu, and keenly suggests that this impossibility is a symptom of a more tragic reality, viz., the loss of a real public, political ecclesial body. This is a consequence, he says, of a modern consciousness that has dichotomized the public and the private, creating an individualized society that *de facto* feeds upon the dismemberment of bodies. Contrariwise, only on the basis of a people called forth to *believe* in the church as the true body of life, the true body politic, will there arise a church that can publicly and forcefully resist the monadological direction of modern secular liberalism – what David in no uncertain terms calls *paganism* – through its production of martyrs, whose witness “is grounded in a clear sense of the identity of the believer *as believer*, and the Church as universal” (3). The remedy, if we are to believe David, is to submit again to a church hierarchy that is able to *authorize* a substantial body politic that educates and disciplines us into a militant faith: he wants a body that can birth believers who understand what it means to fight for something – and who aren't afraid of winning. Here David Dault is ready and willing – if we are not too weak-stomached to turn away – to show us Mother Church *with teeth*. Mother Church in all her feminine voracity, who, to mix metaphors, feeds upon the “ruins of the Spectacle,” its “bread and circuses” (presumably to digest them) on her way to growing into the universal kingdom of God on earth.

Sounds radical. It's not. In fact, if this paper alone were the criteria for determining such things – and thank God its not – David Dault does not at all represent belief *in Jesus Christ*, and

of (crucial creedal distinctions) the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. He represents rather a reactionary Catholicism, the bastard child of post-Christendom worldly politics, whose true progenitor is not the heavenly Kingdom, but the earthly city. The real progeny of Christendom's own *libido dominandi*.

What I am saying is that at the heart of Dault's political vision lies a fundamental misdiagnosis, as I see it: a misdiagnosis of what makes up the *esse* of the *Pax Americana*, and of any earthly "state" across history for that matter. This misdiagnosis itself leads to and is overlain by a misdiagnosis of the logic of *believing*, of Christian faith, and of the martyrial discipline of the Church itself. Which in turn leads to a more fundamental misdiagnosis as to what makes up the catholicity of the Christian church, and as to what constitutes its teaching authority. It is this palimpsest of misdiagnoses that I should like briefly to sort through.

First, we are faced with the question of the modern liberal nation-state. Dault would have us believe that it is precisely the *task* of any secular state to be about the dismembering of the body of the Church – and that the state of modern individualism is yet another regime whose business it is to carry out such dismembering. While this may be right, so far as it goes, it really misses the point of modern politics: its production of individuals is itself an expression of its *conatus*. The *essence* of modern politics is not the production of individuals, but rather the preservation of life against death, the production of individuals belonging to the *bene esse* of the modern state, as a means to an end. It is *this* that makes of the modern liberal nation state yet another version of the *civitas terrena*. This itself is the very logic of "the political," as Spinoza saw so well. In its *conatus essendi*, in its drive to preserve life against death, the modern myth of unconstrained liberty is itself simply a mutation of the perennial political myth of earthly power.

This point is important, if we are not to succumb to the temptation to make of the church hierarchy yet another instrument of that *mythos* of power (Foucault), that same *canatus* (Spinoza), that same *libido* (Augustine), that same wild, savage being (Merleau-Ponty), that same “bare life” (Agamben). So far as this goes, it will not do, I do not at all think, to stage the scene for a regime change: whatever the Church is about in relation to the political, it is not simply about the “disbanding and replacement” of the current state of things “by a regime of virtue as opposed to a regime.” That is, we cannot skip straightaway to speaking so quickly in terms of virtue, *virtus*, *power*, without first stopping to ask: By *whose* virtue, by *what* power, does the church act in the world? If I have a problem with David’s articulation of his alternative political vision, it is a problem with what I take to be a lacuna in his analysis. He has not slowed down long enough to ask this question, it seems to me. Because of this, there is therefore a key lacuna in his account of the logic of believing, an “absent center” if you will. It is very clear as to the *form* that this (and presumably Fish’s – but I’ll let David answer that) believing takes for David: a radical, militant, hierarchical ecclesiology. It is less clear as to the *content* that this believing takes. We can surmise, from what he says, that this content is for Dault a kind of *deposit*, a stable reality, a *truth* given in and through the structures of Catholic ecclesial polity itself. He says as much: the content of belief “is submission to the legitimate authority – the legitimate *reality* – of the Church.” David Dault may indeed find this Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – Pope Benedict XVI. He may not. But he certainly will not find this, as he claims, in Augustine, much less in Augustine’s “On the Profit of Believing.” The content of the Church-as-life, is not some divinely sanctioned stability, deposited to us in a papal hierarchy. Rather, the content of the Church-as-life, for Augustine, is *love*, Christian charity. One no less a hierarchalist than Cyprian is going to say this much, at least: the unity of the Church lies in its

love for one another that is bound up with the one another's singular identification with Jesus Christ. This itself is what makes a martyr, and why a martyr dies *for the church*: she dies loving in this way, loving singularly. David Dault wants the universality of believing. He fails to realize that this universality is realized only through the singularity of Christian love. Here Dault may do well to linger a little longer (though I suppose he's already moved well beyond him) with Martin Luther's *Christian Liberty*, and to consider again just how *catholic* is the logic of love that undergirds the *Protestant* doctrine of justification by faith. It may well be that Dault thinks such talk of the content of faith-as-love is liberal bullshit, that it itself is a husk that must be discarded in order to get to the real core of things: the deposit of teaching in the Church hierarchy. But I submit that such a nostalgia for a pre-modern *mythos* of divinely sanctioned ecclesiological stability is just as obscurantist and pernicious as the modern *mythos* of unconstrained, free individual. Obscurantist because it obscures, under the pretenses of something other, something divine, its reliance on something all too human: the will to the preservation of life over-against death.

Finally, to say (and I should not have to say this, but I fear that I still do) that the *content* of belief for the martyrs was the logic of Christian love is not to opt for modern liberalism vis-à-vis Catholic monarchism. It is rather to reveal that dichotomy itself to be a false one. The martyrs are venerated because they discerned something beyond either of these, something *not of this world*, in their mode of loving: they glimpsed heaven, they *lived* in heaven, they *were* in heaven. The martyr need no longer preserve life against death, because she *had already died in Christ*. Thus, the talk in the early martyrs of the martyr's death as a second baptism in blood, by which she is initiated into heaven, as more efficacious than her first baptism in water, by which she is initiated into the Church, makes martyrdom more revolutionary than Dault himself, or

Yoder, or Hauerwas, or any other twentieth-century thinker has imagined: it cuts across the mythos of power that is the earthly ecclesial hierarchy, because it across all *mythoi* of power as such (here we can again think of Cyprian's trouble with reinstating the lapsed after persecution, who by-passed the hierarchy and went straight to the martyrs, who themselves were thought to have a *more direct and immediate* access to heaven). (In other words, the martyr can carry on earth the body of Christ crucified, because she has the soul of a mystic – Rosanne Cash of Johnny: Daddy was a Baptist his whole life; but he had the soul of a mystic.) Dault and Fish may be right: that the regime of power that is the stable hierarchy of Christian virtue might in fact be *better* than the present love-fest of liberalism. But precisely as *better*, the harmony of hierarchical stability is just as earthly, and just as *monotonous*, as the violence of the sovereign state and the sovereign individual. But here I want to insist (paraphrasing Anselm) that the peace of Christ is not simply that than which nothing *better* can be thought: it is the greatest because it is better than *anything that can be thought* (yes, Anselm was a proto-Kierkegaardian). To imagine *this* is indeed to imagine *heaven*, to imagine not what *could be*, but what *is* the mystical body of Christ *already* being acted out in the lives of the martyrs on earth. We should stop whining about the inability to *name* martyrs in the current political milieu – no earthly political milieu is conducive to such naming. Rather, we should get about the business of educating the church's members into *the practice of martyrdom*, of living supra-naturally, and so beyond “the political” as such. If we do this, it may just be given to us to glimpse neither the *mythos* of modern, unconstrained liberty, nor of pre-modern, divinely sanctioned stability, but something more radically unique and political un-representable than has yet to be imagined: viz., the singularity of Christian love-in-practice.