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Right to Life: A Right Beyond Ideology The Case of Tabaré Vazquez

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ABSTRACT: Both socialism and liberalism are ideologies that were proposed as substitutes for Christendom. But, as the saying goes, in Mexico even Communists are *Guadalupanos* –that is, faithful to the Our Lady of Guadalupe. This attitude of faith as a way of looking at reality without an ideological lens, or even looking at nature without naturalistic assumptions, has long been a part of the Latin American historical landscape and culture. The case of Tabaré Vazquez (President of Uruguay from 2005 to 2010), a self-confessed agnostic and a socialist of the leftist political movement *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), who vetoed a law that would have legalized abortion in Uruguay, is a striking example of such a Communist-Guadalupano. This paper is an account of his story and the reasons why a socialist president defended the right to life with arguments that would make any secularist cringe.

ACCORDING TO TABARÉ VAZQUEZ, it is more important to deal with the real causes of abortion by protecting women, particularly poor women, from exploitation and from the indifference of their partners than to allow its legalization.¹ With this basic conviction, the former president of Uruguay, Tabaré Vazquez (2005-2010), concluded the remarks in which he stated his reasons for vetoing a bill that sought to decriminalize abortion in his country on November 14,

¹ See Vazquez Tabaré, Presidential Decree, November 14, 2008. Accessible at: www.180.com.uy/spip/IMG/pdf/decreto_veto_aborto-2.pdf.

2008.² Vazquez, a physician by profession and a socialist by conviction, opposed his own political movement's attempt to introduce legislation that would have allowed abortion to be legal in Uruguay. This situation presented the paradox of a socialist and a progressive who was nonetheless against a law that is supposed to be one of the landmarks of social progress.

Some, of course, may interpret his action cynically, as a kind of opportunism designed to please the conservative forces of Uruguayan society. This interpretation might carry some credibility in other parts of South America, but it does not hold in Uruguay. A critical reading of the history of the country shows an unmistakably anti-clerical and secularist trajectory, perhaps the most pronounced of all countries in Latin America. In my view, Vazquez's decision suggests a careful evaluation of reality, including the medical and biological aspects of public policy, in preparation for a decision that was based not on ideological prejudices but on facts about human life. Could we claim, then, that the right to life ought to be beyond ideological commitments? If the answer is affirmative, would not the desire for cooperation and dialogue with progressives to reach a rational consensus on issues of human sexuality be validated as an alternate path to the current "culture war"?

Reflection on this question, however, could lead us away from the central aim of this presentation—an examination of the reasons for the veto by the Uruguayan president, with special focus on the historical and cultural differences at work in the ideologies of Latin America. In addition to seeking an explanation of Vazquez's decision, my purpose here is to look at the process by which religious faith is acculturated, especially in relation to the Catholic Church. A careful reading of these antecedents may provide some clues that can illuminate Vazquez's veto and thereby help us to understand a series of historical events in the history of Latin America. First, I will survey various stages in the democratic tradition of Uruguay, and then the process for the assimilation of ideology in Latin America. Finally I will attempt to explain the

² This paper was delivered in May 2009 at the UFL Conference in Minneapolis while Dr. Tabaré Vazquez was still the president of Uruguay. He left the presidency in March of 2010.

reasons for the veto of the abortion bill. Could this veto have been a product of a view of reality beyond any political ideology? Could it be read as an encouraging sign that looking at reality as such, without the taint of ideological prejudices and without appeal to religious tradition, might be a reliable method for justifying and legitimizing the right to life?

I. URUGUAY: FROM DEMOCRACY TO DICTATORSHIP AND BACK

At one time called the “Switzerland of America,” Uruguay enjoyed a stable democracy and economic growth through the first half of the twentieth century. Uruguay is a small country located in southwestern South America, sharing borders with Brazil and Argentina and as well as historic ties to Paraguay, with a population of approximately four million people. Its historical capital, Montevideo, with its eyes open to the Rio de la Plata, was a military fortress, the center of political and cultural life during colonial times. The stability of Uruguay’s democracy has been due in part to what was called the Batllista Reform, a reference to the populist leader José Batlle y Ordóñez, president of the republic during the first and second decades of the twentieth century.

The success of Batlle’s reforms came about by two key factors. The first was the affirmation and implementation of a welfare state, an interventionist state that created a significant bureaucracy and a political clientele. Second, *batllismo* made possible the participation of the middle class and the working class in the administration of the government. The result was a participatory system that gave permanent representation to underprivileged classes through certain constitutional changes such as the so-called collegial system (*colegiado*). The dual executive power used in this system has served to create a political culture of non-exclusion, especially when compared with other nations in the hemisphere.

International finances as well as internal economic reasons began to change Uruguay’s political panorama in the 1950s. The governmental system went into crisis in the mid-1960s and a new constitution was adopted in 1966 that restored a presidential system. Elections under this new constitution were held and won by General Gestido from the

traditional Colorado Party. A short time later he was abruptly replaced by the vice president, Jorge Pacheco Areco. This move initiated a series of delicate political events, prompted by the appearance of urban guerrillas. Pacheco had to face a revolutionary movement led by the legendary group called the Tupamaros, whose aim was to defeat the capitalist system. At that point the days were numbered for Uruguayan democracy. The trigger for that tragedy was the kidnapping and murder by the Tupamaros of Dan Mitrione, an American citizen, an officer of U.S. Office of Public Service, who had allegedly coached the Uruguayan police in forms of torture with electric devices.

The consequences were anything but expected. Pacheco Areco established a state of siege in 1968 that suspended civil liberties, thus escalating the crisis. The confrontation with the guerrillas reached its period of highest activity during the next presidency, that of Juan María Bordaberry, from 1972 to 1976. The national liberation movement of the Tupamaros was ultimately defeated in a struggle that combined urban and rural warfare. It must be noted, however, that the armed forces exercised power *de facto* from 1973 until 1985 through merely “nominal” presidents—first Bordaberry, and later Alberto Demicheli, Aparicio Méndez, and finally Gregorio Alvarez. From being an example of stability and political maturity, Uruguay became a mere façade of democracy for about twenty years. But as early as 1980 civil forces began rejecting the constitutional reforms imposed by the military. By mid-decade popular pressure forced the military to call for general elections in 1984, which resulted in the election of Julio María Sanguinetti, a member of the Colorado Party, as the new president.

The goal of the Sanguinetti administration was to achieve political peace and reconciliation by ending the long years of guerrilla violence and state repression. Hence, an amnesty law was passed with the purpose of turning that sad page of Uruguayan history. In 1990 Luis Alberto Lacalle of the Blanco Party began a term as president lasting to 1995 that focused on the regional aspect of economic integration, on the incorporation of Uruguay to the Mercosur, the common market of the Southern Cone, and on policies of privatization and the reduction of state intervention on the economy. These policies, it must be noted, changed the traditional Uruguayan welfare state and prompted a political reaction

after the re-election of Sanguinetti for a term that lasted until 2000. He was succeeded by Jorge Batlle (a namesake of the Uruguayan reformer) of the Colorado party but allied with the Partido Blanco. It was the defeat of the then growing *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front), a comprehensive collation of leftist political movements, that launched the candidacy of the Socialist physician Tabaré Vázquez.

II. IDEOLOGY AND THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

In 2004 Tabaré Vázquez was elected president. For the first time a leftist coalition had managed to win not only the presidency but a majority in both chambers of congress. Vasquez obtained more than 51% of the votes. Thereby he became the first president in the history of the country who did not belong to either of the traditional parties, Blanco or Colorado. Vazquez had practiced medicine for several years as an oncologist and had been mayor of the city of Montevideo from 1990 to 1995. The policies of Vasquez proved different not only from the policies of previous Uruguayan administrations but from those of other socialist governments across Latin America, such as that of Chavez in Venezuela.

As president, Vazquez proved to be a prudent and yet pragmatic politician, opposed to the orthodox socialist economic policies of his party while remaining faithful to the pursuit of human rights and ready to re-open investigation into abuses that had occurred during the years of military rule. Politically socialist but economically pro-free market and free trade, Vazquez nevertheless shocked the country and crossed the ideological boundaries of his movement by vetoing an abortion bill proposed by his own party.

How can this action be explained? Was it mere pragmatism, or perhaps some sort of political expediency? I am not persuaded that either of these were the major reason. But before considering the rationale for his veto, it is imperative to take a look at the issue of ideology and its historical acculturation in Latin America, especially in relation to the political and ecclesial dimensions of Catholic culture there. Needless to say, both liberalism and socialism as generic ideologies were born out of the Enlightenment, and both aimed to replace the old Christendom. That

is also the reason why, over the last two centuries, several attempts have been made to reconcile these ideologies, in all their variations, with the Catholic tradition. Most often these attempts have had negative consequences for the Christian faith. Either the faith has become irrelevant to the people and to culture at large, or in some cases it has been removed from culture and from politics altogether. It appears that ideologies in general, as Destut Tracy thought, were not only alternatives to religion but would, with time, become religious worldviews themselves.³

This latter claim would certainly be valid in some historical periods and regions of Latin America. To repeat an old Mexican saying, in Mexico, even communists are Guadalupanos—that is, faithful to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The faith of these communist-Guadalupanos is too deeply seated in the soul of Latin America for a secularist ideology to remove the faith completely. This, if you will, is a curious sociological dimension, but one that needed to be taken into account during the preparation of certain Church documents that made reference to ideology, such as the document of Puebla in 1979. Ideologies, as Puebla teaches, by defending the interests of a group and by making absolute the vision proposed, “have become secular religions.”⁴ But at the same time, it must be noted, in the process of secularization conducted by ideologies in Latin America, there has been a politicization of the faith, yet never as an anti-religious phenomenon. Ideologies were, so to speak, “baptized” in Latin America. This attitude of ideological acculturation has been the rule rather than the exception in Latin America. Indeed, far from Marx’s desire that the critique of religion is a condition for the possibility of any other critique, Latin America did not go through the process of the Enlightenment secularization in the same way and with the same magnitude that was typical of the wars of religion in modern Europe.⁵

³ Secundino Núñez, *Ideología de los Partidos Políticos en Paraguay* [*Ideology of the Political Parties of Paraguay*] (Asunción, Paraguay: Institute of Social Studies, 1987), p. 29.

⁴ See Document of Puebla, §535 in Núñez, p. 33.

⁵ See Pedro Morandé, “Modernidad y Cultura Latinoamericana: Desafíos

Are we facing an example of that communist-Guadalupano in President Tabaré? Uruguay has been, since colonial times, one of the most secular nations in South America. Within this context, the struggle against laicism and masonry by Mariano Soler, the Archbishop of Montevideo, is worth mentioning. Bishop Soler led a singular battle against Protestantism and Freemasonry in the second half of the nineteenth century, and this battle may provide a significant background for what is happening today.

In the late nineteenth century, Soler published a well-known book on *Masonry and Catholicism* that affirmed his loyalty to Rome while declaring himself open to what he called the upcoming liberal culture that he envisioned would occur with the emergence of Christian-democratic ideas. It must be noted, though, that liberalism, naturalism, and rationalism were, for the young Bishop Soler as for Pope Leo XIII, the true faces of the anti-Catholic secularism. A few years before, of course, Leo XIII had published the encyclical *Humanum genus* in 1884, denouncing Liberalism and Freemasonry, movements that had had a profound influence in Catholic circles on the continent. Bishop Soler did not stop in his negative attitude toward Liberalism. He demanded a new Christendom as a way of protecting the papacy in this time of serious crisis. The loss of the Papal States was a major concern of that time. Bishop Soler argued that to be a Freemason and a liberal Protestant were equivalent in some respects. But at the same time he predicted that a new world was coming, a world that might well include the renaissance of a new Christendom. Bishop Soler died in 1908, but his pastoral guidance is a living example of how to deal with the secularism that penetrated deeply within the Uruguayan elite and oligarchy.⁶

para la Iglesia” [“Modernity and Latin American Culture: Challenges to the Church”] in *Una Experiencia que se hace escuela. Curso de Doctrina Social de la Iglesia* [*An Experience that Became a School: A Course on Catholic Social Teaching*] (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Cultura y Fé, 1989), pp. 49-61.

⁶ See the excellent account of Bishop Soler legacy by Enrique Dussel in *Protestantes y Liberales y Francmasones. Sociedades de Ideas y Modernidad en América Latina, siglo XIX* [*Protestants, Liberals and Freemasons. Society*

This analysis tries to move beyond seeing Vazquez's views as merely a syncretistic attitude. Vazquez's rationale for his actions compels us to see his stance as arising from a view without ideological or naturalist preconceptions. We find here an assessment that is ideologically value-free, but also lacking in religious references. Vazquez's view is not neutral, though. He seems to appeal exclusively to his experience as a physician and to the law. Medicine and empirical facts as well as a sort of methodological positivism seem to guide his judgment. It is important to note here that positivism in Latin America took a different form than it had in Europe where it took on a more anti-religious strain due to the biases of its founder, Auguste Comte. Uruguayan socialism was linked to a methodological positivism by the fact that its founder, the poet Emilio Frugoni (1880-1969), was adamant in claiming the need for an empirical analysis of reality without resorting to class-bound arguments.⁷ This stance and approach, which in itself amounts to an epistemological realism, demanded a close and faithful reading of reality. But let us turn now to Vazquez's justification of his historic veto of November 18, 2008.

III. THE REASONS FOR THE VETO

Vazquez went to Congress to justify his decision with a speech in two parts. The first part is based on three fundamental aspects regarding sexual and reproductive health. He claims that there is a consensus about the failure of abortion as a social policy. Vazquez not only emphasizes the consensus that abortion is a social evil to be avoided but also warns that in developed countries where abortion has been liberalized such as the United States and Spain, the numbers of abortions have increased. To the ears of an American audience, this statistical evidence coming from a socialist would make any member of the National Right to Life envious

of Ideas and Modernity in Latin America in the Nineteenth Century] (Mexico: Fondo Cultura Economica, 1990), pp. 24-38.

⁷ See Harold Davis, *Latin American Thought, an Historical Introduction* (Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 99-103.

and any member of NARAL cringe.

Secondly, he refers to the existence of a true human life from conception and the need to protect women by law. He even suggests that the law cannot ignore the reality of the existence of life “at the beginning stage of pregnancy, as it is revealed by an honest [evaluation of] scientific data. Biology has evolved considerably. Discoveries, such as in vitro fertilization and DNA, have sequenced the human genome, making it clear that from the moment of conception there is a new life, a new being.”⁸

It must be noted that Vazquez speaks of science and genetic testing. He takes the DNA test as “the queen proof”—a definitive way of establishing the defense of life. Far from his view is any speculation of a Cartesian dualist type that separates humanity from personhood, or human nature from human-rights. Each human being is a “new creature” from conception. Thirdly, he indicates that the degree of civilization of a people is measured by the degree of respect to those in need, and especially to the protection of the weakest, because “the criterion is no longer the subject’s value based on the emotions that rise in another person, or the utility an individual provides, but the value that results from their mere existence.” This claim, obviously, does not really sound like an argument that is being made by an agnostic socialist, but rather a talking point by Mother Teresa or any faithful moral theologian of the Church.

The second part of the rationale advanced by Vazquez refers to the two dimensions of the bill that, unfortunately, have echos here in America. The first dimension concerns conscientious objection and the second refers to the nature of the abortion procedure as such. As to the conscientious objection, Vazquez rejected any regulation that would infringe upon conscience (as the law proposed to him did) because the negation of a conscience clause would “create a source of unfair discrimination toward those physicians who understand that their conscience prevents them from performing abortions, and prevent the freedom of those who change their minds and decide not to continue

⁸ Tabaré Vazquez, Presidential Decree.

performing abortions.”⁹ Moreover, he thought that the law did not respect freedom of thought in area that is deep and intimate. As for the second dimension, the nature of the act of abortion procedure itself, Vazquez vehemently rejects its characterization as a “medical act,” and thereby he reminds the legislators not to ignore international declarations such as the Helsinki and Tokyo Treaties that were incorporated into the Mercosur legislation and adopted by Uruguay since 1996. They reflect the principles of Hippocratic medicine that characterize the physician as someone who needs to act in favor of life and physical integrity. Abortion is not a medical act. An abortion policy will also mean, Vasquez argued, infringing upon their freedom because “there are many hospitals and medical institutions whose by-laws” prohibit them performing abortions.¹⁰

Finally, Vazquez goes to the root causes of abortion and proposes a realistic approach for a reproductive policy. First, he asked legislators to take a second look at the historical roots of a culture of solidarity that make a republic possible. We need, he suggests, to promote solidarity for women as well as their babies and to provide for another option besides abortion, and thus saving both the mother and her child. The project should be, the president finishes, to attack the root causes of abortion in the country and in the emerging socio-economic reality. Indeed, quite a large number of women, particularly from the poorest sectors, are the sole breadwinners of households. For that reason, we must surround helpless women with the essential protection of solidarity instead of facilitating access to abortion.

How are we to read and reconcile these arguments as belonging to a president who is a member of a party in the tradition of socialism, which calls for precisely an absolute autonomy of individuals in reproductive issues? There is no question that in a time of increasing expansion of reproductive rights (especially through the work of NGOs), Vazquez’s assessment is a happy exception to the reigning culture. But might this not just be a case of an ideological syncretism, between

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

liberalism, socialism, and a vestigial Catholicism, in the already mentioned tradition of communist-Latino-American-guadalupanos? I am not persuaded that this last assertion is the case because Vazquez noticeably avoids the use of any term, reference, or allusion to faith or institutional religion. There is no mention of any ideological principle. He relies solely on the law and facts, and on a classical view of medicine as the art of healing. This suggests, without a doubt, that the pro-abortion movement is at its core ideological, an ideology of deception and deceit in relation to the data of reality itself, a projection of people's ideas and tastes onto reality.

Perhaps Vazquez's view of ideology is closer to a creative and dynamic, faithful and loving relation to the facts of reality, eager for beauty and in awe before the gift of life, a vision that has been brewing slowly in his years of medical practice and political experience. In any case, an unmistakably realist view of humanity, beyond any ideological presuppositions and reductive lenses, pushed Vazquez to cast his veto, an action whose reasons are better explained by resorting to his intellectual honesty than a decision driven by ideology or much less so, to the vested interests of the moment. It is a fresh return to reality, with a proper astonishment arising from fascination with what is given to us, something that must be shared both with those who have and those who do not yet have consciousness of humanity. Perhaps, after reading this decision, many of us will open our hearts and pray in a way not unlike the way in which Erasmus prayed to Socrates: "San Tabaré, ora pro nobis."