Pro Patria Mori: Sacrificing Life in Service of the Political Community

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1 Introduction

At Christmas, 1915, five months after the German invasion and occupation of neutral Belgium, Cardinal Mercier, the primate of Belgium, published a pastoral letter entitled *Patriotism and Endurance*. In this letter, Mercier passionately argued that the Belgians were justified in regarding their patriotism as ‘consecrated’ and consequently, the German violation of Belgian national sovereignty as a “sacrilegious profanation”. The letter specifically sought to respond to a pastoral-theological question, put to Mercier by members of his flock, namely whether or not it is justified to view soldiers falling for a just cause (“which ours clearly is”) as martyrs. Mercier’s immediate response was ‘no’, not in the theological sense of the word, for after all, unlike soldiers, the Christian martyr does not resist his executioners. At the same time however, Mercier had little doubt that any soldier who, in avenging violated justice, laid down his life in honor of his fatherland, would be assured of eternal salvation:

The soldier who dies to save his brothers, to protect the hearths and the altars of his country, fulfils the highest form of love. (…) We are justified for hoping for them the immortal crown which encircles the foreheads of the elects. For such is the virtue of an act of perfect love that, of itself alone, it wipes out a whole life of sin. Of a sinner instantly it makes a saint.¹

A few months later his French counterpart, cardinal Billot, responded with severe disapproval:

To say that the mere fact of dying consciously for the just cause of the Fatherland “suffices to assure salvation” means to substitute the

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¹ See for the full text of the pastoral letter in English http://www.zum.de/psm/1wk/ww1/mercier.php3.
Fatherland for God (…), to forget what God is, what is sin, what is divine forgiveness.2

To Billot, positing any political-theological link between God and fatherland, between the forgiving of sins and the imperatives of patriotic duty, was theologically indefensible and should therefore be resisted.

In 1951 the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz, who was a great authority on medieval political theology, revisited this remarkable and fundamental difference of opinion within the Roman Catholic Church at that dramatic moment in modern European history, in an article entitled Pro Patria Mori. Kantorowicz’s historic-systematic reflections in this article point to the conclusion that, during the first half of the twentieth century, the notion of sacrificing one’s life in service of the fatherland had fallen into discredit. This conclusion, which I will reformulate as a statement of problem, will be my point of departure (11).

Not long after the First World War however, Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) – a controversial, seminal, German jurist and political thinker – would reestablish the notion of laying down one’s life in service of the state as central to our political existence, and to the state’s sovereignty, in his polemical treatise The Concept of the Political3 which was aimed against post-war, liberal Weimar Republic Germany’s putting in perspective of state and politics. Schmitt’s invocation of Thomas Hobbes in support of his argument however, fails to square with the fact that specifically Hobbes may be regarded as one of the first modern political theorist to attack the notion of the primacy of community over individual (111).

Current political-philosophical and political-theological discussions regarding the continued meaningfulness of pro patria mori may be viewed in the continuum of the initial debate between Mercier/Schmitt on the one hand, and Billot on the other. Recently, the American philosopher of law Paul W. Kahn
