

————— T H E —————
A M E R I C A N
C A T H O L I C
L A N D M O V E M E N T
————— *Past, Present, and Future* —————

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EDITED BY
JASON M. CRAIG &
R. JARED STAUDT, PHD

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

The American Catholic Land Movement: Past, Present, Future © 2025
Jason Craig, R. Jared Staudt

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Chapter 5 within this work consists of excerpts, with slight editorial adjustments, from the book *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism*, by Fr. Francis Bethel, OSB (Merrimack, NH: Thomas More Press, 2017). Used with permission.

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ISBN: 978-1-5051-3412-4

Kindle ISBN: 978-1-5051-3824-5

ePUB ISBN: 978-1-5051-3823-8

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 269

Gastonia, NC 28053

www.TANBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

IN MEMORIAM

John Senior (1923–1999)

“The great analogy of delving in the earth is prayer—elevation of mind and heart in praise—united in the single root of cult and cultivation. *Ora et Labora*. Work, from erg, en-erg-y, the force which moves the universe, finds its highest physical point in man who in labor transforms matter into praise as God through grace transforms both matter and spirit to glory. According to the Gospel, *Deus agricola est*, God is a farmer.”

—*The Restoration of Christian Culture*

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Commander John F. Sharpe, U.S. Navy (retired)

CDR Sharpe is a 1993 distinguished graduate of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree with honors in English and emphases in political thought and history. Following graduation, he served for six years with the United States Navy Submarine Force and thereafter for two-plus decades as a Navy Public Affairs Officer. In 2000, he and a colleague founded IHS Press to bring back into print classics of Catholic Social Doctrine by major Catholic thinkers of the early twentieth-century, and since then, he has remained Chairman and Managing Director of the Press. Simultaneously, he received his Master of Arts in History from Old Dominion University and completed all but the dissertation towards a PhD in History as a Hagley Fellow at the University of Delaware. He currently serves as Senior Legal Assistant at the Law Offices of Jeffrey E. McFadden, raises sheep and chickens with his wife and children on his homestead, Bold Venture Farm, and directs and occasionally teaches Gregorian chant and classical polyphony at chapels and other venues around the United States. CDR Sharpe is also currently a first-year JD student with the part-time evening program at the University of Baltimore School of Law.

FOREWORD

“The only step forward is the step backward.”

—G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With the World*, 1908

“Each man who desires the success of an ideal should keep its enthusiasm with certitude in his own mind, and trust through this to inspire others.”

—Hillaire Belloc, *Essays in Liberalism* 1897

“As a rule, only that stability which is rooted in one's own holding makes of the family the vital and most perfect and fecund cell of society.”

—Pius XII, *La Solennità della Pentecoste* 1943

The policy of history's greatest statesmen, from the classical to our contemporary age, says political economist Charles Devas in his article on “agrarianism” for the old *Catholic Encyclopedia*, has been to encourage in their states a flourishing population of small farmers—call them what you will: yeomen, peasants, homesteaders, smallholders, or, perhaps less precisely, just the “middle class.” In making this observation, and noting its consonance with what the Catholic Church has taught, from the beginning of her formal commentary upon and, I dare say, *correction and critique* (if

not outright denunciation) of the social disorder that arose at the dawn of the modern age¹ owing to the confluence of several historical trends—rationalist developments in philosophy (and, accordingly, economic thought); centralizing and machine-based developments in industrial technology; and the ever-growing complexity, abstraction, and “unreality” of methods and entities employed by governments and financial actors for the manipulation and increase of token wealth, which rationalism permitted, and which enabled the industrial developments—Devas admits what is perhaps obvious after a moment’s serious reflection. To advocate a rural, agrarian, or yeoman ethos as the ideal foundation upon which both to ideologically envision and to practically construct social, political, and economic order—whether in its smallest manifestation, i.e., the family, or, writ large, as and where relevant, across the legal, political, social, and economic machinery of the state—is to utter a proposition that is essentially *natural*, insofar as the proposition both concerns and derives from the natural order, rather than being an aspect of revelation (as touching upon doctrines that are intelligible but without divine assistance effectively unknowable) or of grace (as in, relating to the participation of the human soul in the life of the Blessed Trinity by means of the sacramental system that Our Lord established while on earth).

¹ Broadly speaking, the modern period follows the Renaissance and the revolt known as the “Reformation” which then gave us the so-called “Enlightenment” and everything that that entailed. The opposition between its doctrine and that of the Catholic Church is perhaps most easily, if not best, grasped from a review of the chief encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII, whose writings—in, again, the words of Charles Devas—“form a manual of social politics.”

Support for this assertion comes in many forms. In terms of the personalities known to have advocated ruralism, numerous are the virtuous pagans of the pre-Christian era who had no connection with revealed religion. We need only think of Aristotle who insisted upon the “mean” as (one of) his ethical rules of life—such as the mean between concentrations of wealth and extreme poverty—and who decried the proliferation of unproductive middlemen to the eclipse of genuine agricultural and craft producers. Likewise, Virgil, whose pastoral sympathies and predilection for rural life are so well known as to need no extended elaboration. Devas mentions Solon of Athens as another. Likewise, post- or non-Christian pagans, such as, if you will excuse the claim,² Jefferson and many of the founding fathers of the United States, were equally drawn—as adverted to in so many words by Harrelson’s essay in this volume on the Southern Agrarians—to a concept of an ideal “yeoman republic” where the cultivation and maintenance of civic virtue depended upon the character traits and ways of thinking nourished and developed by one’s management of a farmstead or smallholding rather than upon participation in great economic enterprises that necessarily concentrate wealth in a few hands and reduce the great many others to the status of non-owning workers.

Closer to our day, numerous perceptive and rigorously thoughtful individuals, such as the architect Ralph Adams Cram, the political thinker and essayist Richard Weaver, the poet T. S. Eliot, and the social critic Arthur J. Pentty, have

² Assuming the claim needs excusing!

advanced the proposition that human society, to be healthy and sane, should both practically—in its laws, customs, and habitual and typical ways of doing and thinking—and philosophically—that is, in the core, shared vision that sits as the bedrock foundation that works, often just imperceptibly, to give society its color, unity, direction, and expression, i.e., what Weaver has called the “metaphysical dream”—comprise, among other things, concrete ethical standards that guarantee and defend the right of owners of small productive properties to remain secure in that ownership and in their status as independent owners. Penty, having studied the medieval guild system in depth, becoming in the process what many Distributists, to include G. K. Chesterton, thought of as the chief thinker and theorist of that movement, insisted that the role of law (again, among other things) and of the accompanying guild rules and customs was to make it feasible for the small owner and the poorer economic actor to survive independent and free in the face of pressure from the rich and powerful whose almost inevitable influence intrinsically conspires to undermine that independence and small ownership. These men, however, being non-Catholics and of various and even eclectic religious persuasions,³ came to the conclusion we have been discussing

³ Indeed, Penty himself was not even much of a Christian, spiritually or theologically speaking, perhaps akin to the position of another notorious (in some circles) non-Catholic, turn-of-the-century thinker who saw the Church as (or, rather, admitted that she was) the source of European cultural and political order. Which is not to say that Penty was hostile to Christianity or, as an aficionado and genuine lover of the medieval world and the art and culture it produced, to Catholicism or to

without any strictly religious guidance, and without reading *Rerum Novarum*—though read it they assuredly did—as a command demanding the submission of the intellect as to a binding religious decree.

Offering yet another of many possible examples, modern scholarship, for all its failings, has established more or less definitively that in the pre-national and early-republic phases of American history—I reference this in view of the fact that the present volume purports to be about an *American* movement even if the idea it elaborates is not the property of a single nation—there was a concept today referred to as the “moral economy,” somewhat of a species of “little-r” republicanism. As a quick point of orientation or reference, Gordon Wood comes to mind as one of the most familiar names from among the diffuse school of historians attempting to see and understand in early-American economic behavior, with an inevitably contemporary and capitalist lens, what a reader familiar with the social ethics of the Middle Ages—which all Catholics are or at least should be—will quickly recognize as the workings of concepts such as justice, fairness, frugality, independence, fortitude, self-reliance, and sacrifice in economic no less than in other affairs.⁴ Outside the intellectual fold from within

the Church. His papers as well as his published writings establish with certainty his sympathy with the Catholic ideological position, and his daughter, whom I had the good fortune to meet in England, told me directly of both the fervor of his wife’s Catholicism and his full support for her having raised their children in the Church.

⁴ While Wood’s is perhaps the most well-known name, at least from among those I studied during a period both intense and now admittedly

dated by fifteen-or-so years while a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Delaware, it is not the most relevant among those seeing in the early American republic vestiges of medieval economic, and therefore (*pace* the contemporary “free marketeers” of the Salamanca school) anti-capitalist, thought and practice. Even given the obvious absence of a fully Catholic worldview informing their work, some of Wood’s fellow historians have done exceptional work pointing out the moral limits that many if not most early Americans envisioned as applicable to economic behavior. The arguably most interesting among dozens of relevant works are the following: Michael Merrill, “The Anticapitalist Origins of the United States,” *Review* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 465-97, and “Putting ‘Capitalism’ in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (Apr 1995): 315-26; Rowland Berthoff, *Republic of the Dispossessed: the Exceptional Old-European Consensus in America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997); Mary Roys Baker, “Anglo-Massachusetts Trade Union Roots, 1130-1790,” *Labor History* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1973): 352-96; James L. Huston, “The American Revolutionaries, the Political Economy of Aristocracy, and the American Concept of the Distribution of Wealth, 1765-1900,” *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (Oct 1993): 1079-1105, and “Economic Landscapes Yet to Be Discovered: The Early American Republic and Historians’ Unsubtle Adoption of Political Economy,” *Journal of the Early American Republic* 24 (Summer 2004): 219-31; Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (New York: Norton, 1982); Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Daniel Vickers, “Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Jan 1990): 3-29; Ronald Schultz, “The Small-Producer Tradition and the Moral Origins of Artisan Radicalism in Philadelphia 1720-1810,” *Past & Present*, no. 127 (May 1990): 84-116; Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (Jan 1994): 3-34; Richard Stott, “Artisans and Capitalist Development,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 257-71; Gary J. Kornblith, “The Artisanal Response to Capitalist Transformation,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 315-2; and Michael J. Thompson, “The Radical Critique of Economic Inequality in Early American Political Thought,” *New Political Science* 30, no. 3 (Sep 2008): 307-24. This list—which omits mention, at least

which Devas extols the ideal population of small farmers, historians have struggled to situate the ideal, referring variously (and quite interestingly, as Our Lord says in Luke 9:40, sometimes even the very stones, as in, the atheist historians, will cry out in praise of evident truth) to “artisan republicanism,” “small proprietorship,” the “producer economy,” and other constructs, to identify a socio-economic vision that puts family scale, productive land, and craftsmanship at the center of economic life, in contradistinction to the capitalist and socialist behemoths bequeathed to us by our post-Reformation, post-World War, and post-Cold War history.

Coming a bit closer to home, but still prescinding from a purely religious and certainly from a uniquely Catholic idea, the roots in “natural” ethics of the importance to society of a critical mass of independent producers who wrest, through their own labor, some if not most of their livelihood from productive property managed under their free and sole control are apparent in a number of ways. To note just one of these: the classical understanding of prudence, queen of the cardinal virtues. Among its many parts is “providence.” While certainly analogous to the name and character a religious soul assigns to God the Father, the philosophers, leaving theology aside, understand that “how to *provide* for the future” derives from “remembrance of the past and understanding of the present,” which three forms of insight work together to enable an intelligent being—like man—to

for context, of the works Gary Nash, Joyce Appleby, Eric Foner, James Henretta, and numerous others who have made relevant contributions to this area of study—is admittedly abbreviated and highly selective.

govern things wisely and direct them toward an end.⁵ Aquinas remarks, in fact, in his short manual of advice to the ruler of Cyprus, following *not* a dogmatic decree but only “the Philosopher”—i.e., Aristotle—that a sufficiency of material goods is *necessary* for an individual to practice virtue.⁶ Only a minute’s reflection is needed to answer the question that this remark raises: What kind of material good requires, to bring it to its specific end (hint: creation of wealth for the meeting of man’s material needs): knowledge and observation of the past (learning from one’s mistakes, or, better, from one’s ancestors); understanding of the present (the sky’s the limit); and a resultant ability to provide for the future (whether this be ensuring the animals are fed, preparing for the frost, or harvesting and storing grain and vegetables)? More provocatively: Can a man who is not faced with these and the thousand-and-one other duties, tasks, and burdens of the active homestead (whether full or partial) ever come authentically to know providence and prudence, or even in their fullness to exercise them?

Given the upshot of the foregoing excursus, touching briefly upon the reality that the rural or agrarian social ideal, as the preferred inspiration for family and broader social organization, is, strictly speaking, a creature of the natural order, how, then, do we have before us a book on the “Catholic” land movement? Our editor’s introduction makes clear that Catholic authorities—from popes to activists to scholars to social workers—have all adverted to the sanity and

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 22, a. 3, c.

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De regno*, no. 118, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/DeRegno.htm>.

necessity of a social order that facilitates the maintenance and defense of Devas's "flourishing populations of small farmers or peasants." But the question that arises is whether those authorities, coincidentally Catholic, promote Devas's vision as mere custodians and spokesmen of his essentially natural and political conception, alongside other brilliant and sane non-Catholic thinkers like Penty, Weaver, Eliot, and so many others, or whether they do so as integral Catholics promoting an integrally Catholic ideal. And why does it matter?

For a quarter century, inspired by my partner,⁷ Deric O'Huallachain, IHS Press has endeavored, in amateur fits and starts that pale in comparison with the legacy of our friend Tom Nelson, founder of TAN Books, which has published the anthology you now hold in your hand, to draw to the attention of those who have ears to hear the reality that, however controversially, Hilaire Belloc belligerently asserts as the final line of *Europe and the Faith*: "The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith."⁸ The point for IHS, of course, not

⁷ Deric O'Huallachain is a London-born Irishman, my senior in age as well as in wisdom, experience, and general knowledge, with whom I founded IHS Press in June of 2001. His health is very poor, and as of this writing, we can only, humanly speaking, pray for a holy and happy death. As with many mentors I have known over a very blessed lifetime that started early on with driving American submarines behind Russians in the North Atlantic, and soon thereafter developed into a near obsession with reading the works of Catholics and other authorities on all the burning questions of the twentieth century, my only regret is failing to squeeze that last drop of knowledge and wisdom out of my friend before Divine Providence made it impossible to do so. I have no way of knowing, by the time this volume will be in print and circulating, whether my friend, as St. Paul says, will be in or out of the body. In any case, I do ask readers' prayers for the welfare of his soul. *Oremus et vigilemus*.

⁸ Hilaire Belloc, *Europe and the Faith* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1924), p. 331.

to take away from the literal (and defensible) meaning of Belloc's premise, has been that if the Word was indeed made flesh, His cult would quite obviously become incarnate in a whole host of ways: law, customs, habits, fashion, architecture, music, liturgy, cuisine, literature, folklore, and, finally, political economy—and that, following the Incarnation, man must not put asunder what God has joined.

In other words, just as, for Belloc, Europe can be nothing other than the Faith, during that period of human history following the Incarnation in time and on the earth of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, so for us, as for St. Thomas, the purpose of men living together in society is for the purpose of living *well*; and living well is living the *good* life, which is the *virtuous* life.⁹ And yet living the virtuous life is not an end in itself but, rather, “through virtuous living, man is further ordained to a higher end, which consists in the enjoyment of God.”¹⁰ St. Thomas, accordingly, sums up the height, breadth, width, and depth of the doctrine of the Social Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ as follows: “It is not the ultimate end of an assembled multitude to live virtuously, but through virtuous living *to attain to the possession of God.*”¹¹

Thus the *Catholic* land movement. The *anima naturaliter Christiana* of Tertullian instinctively realizes that there can no longer, on this side of Calvary, be a radical separation (without obliterating *distinctions*) between grace and nature, faith and reason, Church and state, knowledge and inquiry, authority and vindication, justice and preference, equanimity

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De regno*, no. 106.

¹⁰ Aquinas, no. 107.

¹¹ Aquinas, no. 107.

and power, apportionment and acquisition. All power must serve justice, and, as Maritain famously remarked before the disorientation in the *Action Française* affair, “The human city fails in justice and sins against itself and against its members if, when the truth is sufficiently proposed to it, it refuses to recognize Him Who is the Way of beatitude.”¹² For the vindication of this and no other principle was IHS Press established.

In our time, however, one problem seemed to need more attention than any other—and this probably because of the uniquely *American* contribution to capitalism, and hence the unique glory of this volume on the American Catholic back-to-the-land effort. Historically, capitalism sundereed the laborer from his property. By doing so, it ushered in the “wage system,” where mere employees—“hands,” as the English masters had it, rather than heads, hearts, and souls—were reduced, as Pius XI reminds us, to a proletarian state, referencing not so much Marx as classical antiquity. In response, it was not only the Knights of Labor, rescued from destruction by the good offices of a figure no less than Henry Cardinal Manning himself, who agitated for the destruction of the “wage system,” but also Father Vincent McNabb, OP, who insisted contrarily upon the “ownership system,” and the American bishops in conference, who, in 1918, under the intellectual leadership of John Ryan, also mentioned herein later on, insisted that the “majority must somehow become owners, or at least in part, of the instruments of production”

¹² Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (Sheed & Ward, 1928), 37.

even though such a radical change would involve “to a great extent the abolition of the wage system.”

IHS, therefore, embarked on a program to publish tracts by Catholic thinkers that would, ideally, appeal to a twin track of reader: first, the Catholic who was docile to the teaching of the Church, and who could be rescued from economic error and ignorance by simple exposure to the reality that the Church—read Sheen’s *Communism and the Conscience of the West* if this proposition is hard to swallow—disfavored capitalism as much as she disfavored communism and socialism. Second, the non-Catholic who, following Eliot, Weaver, Pentty, Cram, and others, instinctively knew that there was something ruthless, inhumane, unjust, and unnatural about capitalism that was no less bad than socialism, and that a sane alternative, sanctioned by—as Weaver puts it, in a different setting—the wisdom of the Greeks and the mercy of Christianity, necessarily existed—but who did *not* know that this alternative was, saving the distinction between temporal and spiritual affairs, sacred doctrine and philosophy, and the other analogous dualities, in modern (i.e., post-Renaissance) times, uniquely defended by the Catholic Church and her chief exponents and apologists. Fritz Schumacher is perhaps the easiest example, alongside Douglas Hyde, of a thinker who all along was looking for the Church’s social doctrine and, when he found it, joined her. For this reason, I humbly beg to differ with at least the word choice of the illustrious Dr. Carlson who suggests below how “unlikely” it is that agrarianism emerged among American Catholics. His point—that Catholic immigrants were concentrated in urban centers—is well-enough taken.

But his intellectual and ideological point is incorrect: from the time Our Lord walked the earth, the ethos of the Church has been rural; His parables are agrarian; He first revealed Himself in the flesh to an ox, an ass, and sheep; The Church's liturgy favors, by reference, rural, real, natural life; the classical authors at the root of her philosophy are of a pastoral temperament; her ethics are Distributist; and her thinkers, to a man, *pace* Michael Novak,¹³ defend the wide distribution of ownership of productive property. As Fanfani says in his study of capitalism, though examples be adduced *ad infinitum*, no evidence is available to make us change our conclusion that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the Catholic and capitalistic conception of life.

At the end of the day, the value of this volume, as of the few historical gems (we hope and pray there are many more to come) that IHS has been privileged over the years to circulate, is the testimony to the immortality of truth—and, in this particular case, of the permanence of the socio-economic ideal represented by whatever name one wishes to give it: Distributism, agrarianism, ruralism, small proprietorship, solidarism, synarchism (“Google” this term and “Mexico” for a primer), corporatism, the guild system, etc. The vision comes to us not from the Church as a matter of faith to be believed by virtue of an *ex cathedra* pronouncement, though, I would argue, it has equivalent intellectual authority. Rather, it comes to us as part of the human patrimony—i.e., the unchangeable nature of man and society, upon

¹³ His neo-conservative capitalism is definitively dealt with in our introduction to Fanfani's *Catholicism, Protestantism, and Capitalism* (Norfolk, Va.: IHS Press, 2003).

which Christianity has built, placing grace atop the natural order to confirm, defend, uplift, rectify, and inspire what was already good and true in our civilization. Though it does not constitute fully decisive evidence, I offer anecdotally the fact that long before, in 1926, the term “Distributism” came to be as a result of a blessed or ill-fated evening in a London pub—thirty years before, as it happens—Belloc was decrying the divorce of personality and production and again in 1907 affirming that “the sentiment of property is normal to and necessary to a citizen.”

The Catholic land movement, accordingly, is *Catholic* essentially and incidentally—the latter because Catholicism is not strictly necessary for vindicating a principle of natural reason which makes ownership of productive property by a man and his family one of the primary social and political rights, and which no revelation is necessary to reveal; but the former because, given humanity’s darkened intellect, it is the unique role of the Church, as guarantor and custodian of all that is true and good, to not only teach men the truth as revealed, as it were, in secret, by the Holy Ghost, but to confirm and affirm and vindicate those sane, natural principles without service to which human civilization will not survive. For this reason, Pope St. Pius X, in his definitive and arguably unsurpassed work on the duty of the Catholic laity to combat the forces working to eliminate the influence of the Faith on public life, observes, with characteristic clarity and precision, that while the Church has no *direct* role in promoting the good of the temporal order, such good flows naturally from her divine and supernatural mission, because, the pope says—in terms we might even call Bellocian—“*The*

civilization of the world is Christian. The more completely Christian it is, the more true, more lasting and more productive of genuine fruit it is.”¹⁴

With the foregoing in mind, perhaps readers will better appreciate the profundity and significance of the words that close Belloc’s *Europe and the Faith*, in which—with his unparalleled concision and forthrightness, and obvious if not intentional reference to the spirit, if not the words, of the remark St. Pius X made fifteen years earlier—he sets before his readers the specters of communism and capitalism, and adverts to the reaction thereto within the remains of Christendom.

Against both, the pillar of reaction is peasant society, and peasant society has proved throughout Europe largely coordinate with the remaining authority of the Catholic Church. For a peasant society does not mean a society composed of peasants, but one in which modern Industrial Capitalism yields to agriculture, and in which agriculture is, in the main, conducted by men possessed in part or altogether of their instruments of production and of the soil, either through ownership or customary tenure. In such a society all the institutions of the state repose upon an underlying conception of secure and well-divided private property which can never be questioned and which colors all men’s minds. And that doctrine, like every other sane

¹⁴ *Il fermo proposito* § 4 (1905) (my emphasis).

doctrine, though applicable only to temporal conditions, has the firm support of the Catholic Church.¹⁵

Let us hope, by God's grace and the efficacy of the present volume, that He will continue to conserve His Church in holy religion, such that from the housetops she will preach, in and out of season, her true and traditional social doctrine and the social reign of her Lord, and that the reaction of peasant society will increase and multiply unto the salvation, temporal and eternal, of mankind.

Commander John F. Sharpe, USN (ret.)
 Director and Chairman, IHS Press
 B.S., United States Naval Academy
 M.A., Old Dominion University
 Ph.D. (ABD) University of Delaware
 LL.M., University of Baltimore School of Law

¹⁵ Hilaire Belloc, *Europe and the Faith*, (the Paulist Press, 1921), 260.