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America -- and Vatican II -- through prism of classical Greece and Rome

by Timothy Kelly

ROME REBORN ON WESTERN SHORES: HISTORICAL IMAGINATION AND THE CREATION OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

By Eran Shalev

University of Virginia Press, \$45

Eran Shalev did not intend that his work would explain the contours of Catholic historiography, and yet, as will be seen below, he provides a provocative spark for doing just that.

First, a look at his argument, that the American founders, elites as well as ordinary citizens, saw themselves through the prism of classical Greece and Rome. In so doing, they inherently adopted a view of history as cyclical, and saw the emerging independent American nation as the latest manifestation of the Roman Republic. That cycle included not only the republic's birth, but also its corruption and fall.

Here is the lasting division he depicts.

Northerners saw the potential for America to escape the cycle, to steer away from the fate that befell first Rome and then Britain. America could become the perfect and enduring republic, built on a lasting civic virtue.

Southerners were not so optimistic, and saw signs of danger and impending corruption all around.

Shalev is ultimately concerned with how these metaphors shaped the founders' understanding of time, of history itself, rather than with establishing merely that the founders drew powerfully from classical history to explain themselves. Did America stand inside the repeating cycle of republican rise and fall, or

did it break that cycle -- chart a new linear history of progression toward full redemption? These dichotomous positions constituted an intellectual and ideological conflict that Americans never resolved, but that shaped the founders' understanding of themselves and the new nation.

These nascent Americans saw themselves as the Rome of Cato, Cincinnatus and Caesar, not of popes, cardinals and curia. Most founders would have had no part of efforts to restore medieval Catholic Europe. But the debate that Shalev so adroitly illuminates between two visions of history in revolutionary America reminds one of the conflict over the meaning and legacy of the Second Vatican Council.



To repeat the thought: Eighteenth-century Americans saw their revolution as

the latest manifestation of republican renewal. Those wedded to the cyclical understanding of history (Southerners) knew that the period of corruption and decline would follow inevitably -- and many feared that the period was not far off. America could no more escape the cycle than did Rome. Those with a more linear view of history (Northerners) saw the potential for a more permanent republic that American civic virtue might perfect and extend; America might step out of the cycle by studying and avoiding Roman pitfalls.

To substitute Vatican II for Shalev's republic is to raise interesting and informative questions about the nature of Catholic historical understanding. Almost everyone agrees that Vatican II constituted a renewal of Catholicism, just as most founders agreed that the American Revolution effected the republican renewal. Early explanations for Vatican II reforms were rooted in a self-conscious harkening back to the earliest years of the church, to the period when Christian communities first formed. Reformers saw their work as restoration rather than revolution, just as the American founders saw their efforts as the re-manifestation of the early Roman Republic -- "Rome reborn on western shores."

But what then, in Vatican II terms, of the period that followed? Do the five succeeding decades constitute the new golden age, or a decline and fall? Conservative Catholics embrace a cyclical understanding of church history and see corruption and decline. In this they echo Southern founders of the American republic who worried so much about the period following the revolution. Conservative Catholics see the years following Vatican II as a fall from a golden age, though they more often identify the 1940s and '50s as that glorious period -- and then must pull Vatican II back into that era. They suggest that the council itself was "continuous" with the pre-Vatican II period, and that a distorted implementation of the council in the years following constituted the fall.

Liberal Catholics are more like Shalev's Northern founders. They see Vatican II as starting the church down a new path, a renewed way of being Catholic and understanding the church. Just as Northerners at the time of the American Revolution were confident that the new nation could avoid the pitfalls of republican corruption and fall, liberal Catholics have confidence that the renewed church can break the

cycle of rise and fall. By returning to the church's founding essence, Vatican II allowed Catholics to re-manifest the early church.

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For all American readers, *Rome Reborn* is worth the time (and cost). It proposes an intriguing view of our nation's founders. For American Catholic readers, enjoy it for itself, but know it also talks to us in a unique way about one of the central debates of the church today.

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