

## A Common World is Possible: Maritain, Pope Francis, and the Future of Global Governance

Kevin Ahern

**Abstract:** From planetary climate change to the COVID pandemic, the human family is faced with urgent challenges that transcend the borders of the traditional nation state. Here, the Catholic moral tradition, as embodied in different ways by the writings of Jacques Maritain and Pope Francis, offers constructive insights as to how the global political landscape should be organized. In the wake of the Second World War and the advent of the nuclear age, Jacques Maritain proposed a political philosophy for the creation of a future world state. Six decades later, Pope Francis offers a more pastoral argument for a more just, equitable, and fraternal world order. This paper examines the visions of global governance advocated by both Maritain and Pope Francis. Drawing from both figures, this paper identifies five key values that might guide the mobilization of the Catholic community as it works for a more just and common world order: a universal solidaristic vision centered on the human person that affirms the value of pluralism, a multi-layered structure of global governance, and bottom-up change through participation. Together, these values offer ethical guideposts as the international community considers how to reform the present system of global governance, including the United Nations system.

**O**n February 23, 2022, Ambassador Vassily Nebenzi of the Russian Federation presided over the United Nations (UN) Security Council as his government launched a new military offensive against Ukraine. During the session, Ukraine’s ambassador, Sergiy Kyslytsya, demanded that Nebenzi relinquish the rotating position of president and “pass these responsibilities onto a legitimate member of the Security Council, a member that is respectful of the charter.”<sup>1</sup> Over the next few hours and

---

<sup>1</sup> Zoe Zaczek, “Ukraine’s Representative to the United Nations Blasts Russia’s Ambassador, Says It Is ‘Too Late’ for de-Escalation,” *Sky News Australia*, February 24, 2022, [www.skynews.com.au/world-news/ukraines-representative-to-the-united-nations-blasts-russias-ambassador-says-it-is-too-late-for-deescalation/news-story/70f75f01b1775a913d651b5909ce8cde](https://www.skynews.com.au/world-news/ukraines-representative-to-the-united-nations-blasts-russias-ambassador-says-it-is-too-late-for-deescalation/news-story/70f75f01b1775a913d651b5909ce8cde).

months, the world watched in near helplessness as Russia intensified the conflict, threatening global grain and energy supplies, unleashing a humanitarian disaster, and eroding trust in the Security Council (UNSC) and wider UN system. A year later, after the brutal terrorist attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the beginning of Israel's highly criticized military response in Gaza, the UNSC again appeared unable to offer an adequate and timely response to an escalating regional conflict that resulted in a record number of deaths of UN aid workers. Efforts to address humanitarian concerns in the International Court of Justice and human rights bodies also failed to stop the conflict.

These latest spectacles at UN Headquarters come as the world confronts a growing number of what Kofi Annan once described as “problems without passports” that threaten the stability and security of people and the planet.<sup>2</sup> These transnational challenges include the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, terrorist groups, and a fragile, unregulated global economy.

In the midst of this hyper-globalization, what might the Catholic moral tradition have to offer? Writing in two very different contexts, both Jacques Maritain and Pope Francis make compelling cases for greater global integration in the creation of a new just and peaceful world order. Both point to possibilities and moral priorities that can guide the development of a more just and virtuous way of organizing our common home. For Maritain, who experienced both the horrors of the Second World War and the hopeful creation of the UN, the answer, albeit a long-term goal, is a world state. Six decades later, Pope Francis offers a more immediate and pastoral vision. Unlike the French philosopher, Francis does not call for the creation of a world state—in the singular. Rather, he looks at how the systems of global governance can be strengthened, and power distributed more justly.

This paper explores these visions of global governance in four sections. Part one briefly outlines the present need for reforms to bridge gaps in the present multilateral infrastructure. The second and third parts consider the approaches proposed by Maritain and the current pope. The final section identifies five guiding principles at the convergence of both figures that might guide the mobilization of the Catholic community as it works for a more just and common world order, namely: a universal solidaristic vision centered on the human person that affirms the value of pluralism, a multi-layered structure of global governance, and bottom-up change through participation. Taken together, these values offer ethical guideposts for discernment among Catholics and other people of good will as the international community engages in new discussions over the reform and future of

---

<sup>2</sup> Kofi A. Annan, “Problems Without Passports,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 132 (2002): 30, doi.org/10.2307/3183446.

global governance, including the United Nations system. But first, what is global governance?

## GOVERNING GLOBALIZATION

The term “global governance” emerged in scholarly circles at the end of the Cold War and gained policy attention with the Commission on Global Governance (1992–1995). One early definition offered by Robert Cox describes it as “the procedures and practices which exist at the world (or regional) level for the management of political, economic, and social affairs.”<sup>3</sup> These procedures and practices, like the proposals made to reform them, take different shapes, including models of centralized power in a world state, decentralized federations or unions of states, and systems based on looser multilateral coordination networks.

In considering global governance, two dimensions are often overlooked. First, while the term may be relatively new, efforts to envision “procedures and practices” to organize the world at a macro level are not. Medieval empires and European mercantilism, for instance, had their own models of how to manage affairs beyond the local level. Second, global governance has always incorporated input from non-state actors; as one analytical report put it: “government, though important, is not the totality of governance, let alone human experience.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the term “global governance,” as Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson argue, serves as a useful analytical tool that invites a wider and more comprehensive look at the dynamic interplay of power and authority across time and space, and involving a range of actors.<sup>5</sup>

The normative and juridical perspectives that dominate the present approach to global governance, however, remain largely rooted in (or perhaps even constrained by) a post-Westphalian outlook that centers power in sovereign states. This can be seen, for example, in the *United Nations Charter*, which Robert Drinan described as “a compromise

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Cox, “Introduction,” in *The New Realism: Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1997), xvi, [www.catdir.loc.gov/catdir/description/hol055/96017550.html](http://www.catdir.loc.gov/catdir/description/hol055/96017550.html).

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Global Security, Justice, and Governance, *Confronting the Crisis of Global Governance* (The Hague: The Hague Institute for Global Justice, 2015), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, eds., “Making Sense of Global Governance Futures,” in *Global Governance Futures* (London: Routledge, 2021), 7–8. See also Timothy J. Sinclair, *Global Governance: Key Concepts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

solution among nations too jealous of their own sovereignty to form a union of nations with real juridical enforceability.”<sup>6</sup>

Increasingly, however, this system and the idea of state sovereignty are under pressure. There is a growing awareness of the power of agents that go beyond the state, including transnational corporations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social media, and international criminal networks. “We are,” as Maryann Cusimano Love argues, “in a period of transition.” While it is unlikely that the sovereign state will soon disappear as the building block of planetary order, it remains unclear if it “can be retrofitted to weather the storms” as some corporations and media elites wield more power and wealth than many governments.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the tempests brought about by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the pandemic, and climate change all reveal cracks in the current infrastructure. Even a cursory inspection exposes structural defects, or what Weiss has described as various kinds of gaps. First, there are *knowledge gaps*, evident in the failure to communicate information on the nature of transnational problems. The inability and/or unwillingness to share data on COVID infection rates or greenhouse gas emission levels, for instance, can have real impacts on the lives of peoples on the other side of the planet.

For Weiss, effective global governance is further hindered by *normative gaps*, which surface in the absence of agreed-upon values regarding global problems such as climate change. Action to address a global issue is nearly impossible without consensus on fundamental guiding values. Thirdly, even when there are adequate information about a problem and a shared set of values, there is *policy gaps* which inhibit the international community from agreeing on concrete principles, goals, and the steps needed to achieve them.<sup>8</sup> The failure to reach consensus on policies is linked to a fourth gap, the *institutional gap*, or the absence of effective and properly funded mechanisms to implement and assess selected policies.<sup>9</sup> Finally, all of this is exacerbated by *compliance gaps*. Constrained by absolute notions of state sovereignty, the present system relies on the voluntary will of states to comply with international norms, policies, and agreements. Ultimately, as Pope Benedict XVI points out, this means that the system often lacks “real teeth” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 67). Thus, if states, especially powerful states with veto power in the United

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert F. Drinan, “Pius XII’s Legacy to World Federalism,” *Catholic Lawyer* 6, no. 1 (1960): 14.

<sup>7</sup> Maryann Cusimano Love, ed., *Beyond Sovereignty: Issues for a Global Agenda*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 339.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas G. Weiss, *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Weiss, *Global Governance*, 15.

Nations Security Council, choose to violate agreed upon norms, there is often little that can be done beyond naming and shaming.

Given the fragility and instability of the present infrastructure, what role can the Catholic tradition play? Strengthening global governance is not welcome in all sectors of the church. Some, especially those inspired by Christian realism, are concerned that governance structures are at far too much danger of being corrupted by human sinfulness and the interplay of power and self-interest at collective levels. Christian populists and Christian nationalists, for their part, oppose efforts that might limit the power and privileges of their own countries (e.g., America First). Sometimes these may coincide with widespread, and often antisemitic, conspiracy theories concerning global elites and the creation of a new world order. Still others, including strands of Catholic anarchism (e.g., Catholic Worker), oppose strengthening global governance out of a distrust for large scale governmental solutions.

Overall, however, the Catholic Church has proven to be a vocal supporter of more robust forms of global governance, and is engaged with these systems of governance on at least three levels. At the grassroots level, the Catholic Church has a wide global reach, with educational institutions and charitable networks in nearly every country. Here, it has enormous potential to both mobilize and educate citizens in support of systemic reforms and cooperate with the structures of global governance on the ground (e.g., humanitarian relief). Second, the Catholic Church has a long tradition of operating at the highest levels of policy development through the diplomatic work of the Holy See. Today, the Holy See maintains bilateral diplomatic relations with over 183 states, and multilateral relations with over forty intergovernmental organizations.<sup>10</sup> Finally, operating in a space between the grassroots and the Holy See are a range of international Catholic organizations and religious congregations, many with formal relations with the UN system.<sup>11</sup> Given the increasing pressures facing people and the planet today, how might this “Catholic potential” be mobilized to bridge some of the governance gaps enumerated above?

---

<sup>10</sup> “Bilateral and Multilateral Relations of the Holy See,” The Holy See, October 22, 2009, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_20010123\\_holy-see-relations\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_20010123_holy-see-relations_en.html).

<sup>11</sup> See Kevin Ahern, “Mediating the Global Common Good: Catholic NGOs and the Future of Global Governance,” in *Public Theology and the Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach*, ed. Kevin Ahern, Meghan J. Clark, Kristin Heyer, and Laurie Johnston (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 14–25.

## MARITAIN: FROM THE NEW CHRISTENDOM TO THE WORLD STATE

One potential source of guidance comes from Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), a figure uniquely positioned to develop a political philosophy of global governance. Maritain saw firsthand the dark side of humanity as he faced totalitarian and fascist governments in Europe, regimes that forced him and Raïssa, his Jewish-Catholic wife, into exile. Not content to remain a detached philosopher, he became involved directly in the efforts to reconstruct Europe and articulate new legal instruments on human rights and education, as Ambassador of France to the Holy See (1944–1948) and as head of the French delegation to the Second General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In this space of straddling philosophy and diplomacy, Maritain also contributed to the committee of philosophers who gave comments on the draft of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

Influenced by Thomistic political philosophy, Maritain advanced a positive view of the government's role in the growing horizon of the common good. Before the Second World War, he looked beyond the borders of the nation state in his proposals for a "new Christendom." In *Humanisme intégral* (1936), Maritain proposes a (Eurocentric) path to democratically unite peoples across the continent based on shared Christian values and heritage.<sup>12</sup> In a series of articles in *Commonweal* magazine in 1940, the exiled philosopher widens this proposal. Assuming an Allied victory, Maritain endorses the idea of a federation of nations in Europe: "Truly our times require a complete recasting of the modern idea of the State and of the relations between States."<sup>13</sup> Such a federated entity, emerging from the ashes of destruction, he believed, would be the only way to preserve a lasting peace. As with *Humanisme intégral*, the *Commonweal* articles argue that a European federation would be possible given the shared (Christian) common past and "common spirit of civilization."<sup>14</sup> Importantly, in these articles, written more than a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he is less optimistic about anything larger than a European system: "It would also be illusory to suppose that at the end of the war the entire planet could enter into a federal régime which would forever guarantee universal peace. Those who spread such ideas . . . will be

---

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence*, ed. and trans. Otto Bird (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 255. See also Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Maritain, "Europe and the Federal Idea (Part I)," *Commonweal*, April 19, 1940, 547; See also Jacques Maritain, "Europe and the Federal Idea (Part II)," *Commonweal*, April 26, 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, "Europe and the Federal Idea (Part I)," 545.

disappointed.”<sup>15</sup> Within a decade, Maritain would become one of those evangelists.

Following his exile in the more pluralistic context of the United States and his post-war experiences working directly with diplomats and philosophers from dozens of countries and cultures, Maritain expands his earlier work with *Man and the State* (1951) in two significant ways. First, rather than focusing only on Europe, the philosopher employs a wider perspective in the wake of the devastation of the war, a disaster for humanity marked by both the Holocaust and the advent of nuclear weapons. Second, he moves away from the term “new Christendom” and exclusive appeals to a common Christian heritage. Instead, with nods to his Thomistic natural law framework, he looks to a shared understanding of human rights as a common unifying base. Already in 1941, Maritain expressed a more optimistic understanding of how people of different faiths could cooperate based on the “primordial ethical value of the law of brotherly love.”<sup>16</sup> There are indeed, as he famously points out in acknowledging the universality of human rights, common bases among all peoples of different cultures and religions, so long as you don’t ask “why?”<sup>17</sup> A decade later, he argues that people “belonging to very different philosophical or religious creeds and lineages could and should co-operate in the common task and for the common welfare of the earthly community.”<sup>18</sup> In such a pluralist society, the Christian tradition would still have an important role to play, not as the unifying skeleton or imposed framework but as a “leaven” for justice.<sup>19</sup>

Maritain’s progressive vision toward a worldwide political society is framed by important distinctions between the community, society, nation, state, and body politic. Briefly, the *community* is a fact, a product of reality as opposed to a *society*, which is an entity created by reason for a specific task. Thus, societies are created and shaped by the “voluntary determination of human persons” and can often lead to the creation of communities and community sentiments.<sup>20</sup> One of the most important societies for the creation of a nation is the *body politic*, a political society “required by nature and achieved by reason.”<sup>21</sup> By

<sup>15</sup> Maritain, “Europe and the Federal Idea (Part I),” 545.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Achievement of Co-Operation among Men of Different Creeds,” *Journal of Religion* 21, no. 4 (1941): 366.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998; originally published in 1951), 77.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The Pluralist Principle in Democracy,” in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 166.

<sup>19</sup> Maritain, “The Pluralist Principle in Democracy,” 170.

<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 10.

their very nature, Maritain argues, human persons need to come together to form such societies for the achievement of common tasks and the common good. The experience of working together and achieving concrete tasks solidifies a sense of shared meaning and can engender a wider sense of community.

Like Aquinas, Maritain sees the perfect society as one based on both justice and friendship, with an eye to the common good. The *state* is the instrumental part of the political society, specifically “concerned with the maintenance of law, the promotion of the common welfare and public order, and the administration of public affairs.”<sup>22</sup> Importantly, the state has an instrumental role; it is not an end in itself, it is not the totality of public life, and it can change over time.

In this analysis, Maritain points to the United States as an example where the people of thirteen separate colonies consented to the common task of creating a common political society (body politic), to be served by institutional structures (the federal state). After years of struggle, joint enterprises and a civil war, the United States were able to form a nation. Similar developments took place in the development of modern European states, such as France or Germany, and some states emerging out of colonialization, including Tanzania. In these examples, communities of nations have come together in political societies for a specific task which has then resulted in the creation of multinational nations.<sup>23</sup> This, as history also reveals, is not always easy or possible.

For Maritain, a difference between the successful development of a body politic and an unsuccessful effort lies in the *people*, “the multitude of human persons who, united under just laws, by mutual friendship, and for the common good of their human existence, constitute a political society or a body politic.”<sup>24</sup> As a society, the body politic must be willed by the people in order to take proper shape. In other words, if the people do not wish the creation of a body politic, then efforts to create institutions such as the state cannot be successful. Echoing Aquinas, a “political perversion” occurs when persons are put at the service of the state.<sup>25</sup> If persons form the political society and if the state is the instrument of that society, then the state should be at the service of persons and the common good, not the other way around.

These considerations lead him to envision the creation of larger and larger political societies, served by corresponding structures to appropriately tackle more complex problems. Indeed, *Man and the State* suggests an almost natural widening or growth in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 13.

development of the body politic from smaller geographic units toward a more universal dimension, where the end result is a political society with a global scale and the creation of a world state.<sup>26</sup>

Not surprisingly, this proposal for something far more ambitious than the UN system was met with criticism by some philosophers and theologians. One of the earliest critiques, for example, came from the Jewish Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai in a 1951 review of *Man and the State*. For Kolnai, unconvinced by Maritain's appeals to pluralism and democracy, the idea of creating a world state dangerously invites "the despotic rule of one massive totalitarian power."<sup>27</sup> Replacing the state with a world government, Kolnai worries, would "conjure up the specter of an infinitely worse Caesar."<sup>28</sup>

Writing almost seventy years later, Emily Butler Finley echoes Kolnai's concerns about totalitarianism and argues that Maritain's utopic vision downplays "the darker side of humanity that was taken seriously by earlier Christian political thought."<sup>29</sup> This overly optimistic proposal, she argues, underestimates the reality of sin, and contributes to what she identifies as Catholicism's turn "away from beliefs previously deemed central to the faith."<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, this romantic utopia, she contends, is "dangerous in the same way that other political ideologies are to the body politic."<sup>31</sup>

While critics are right to worry about the risk of totalitarianism in proposals for a world state, Maritain's proposal attends to the importance of keeping the instruments of the state in check. Drawing on his distinctions between state and body politic, Maritain is insistent that a world state can only ever come about following the creation of a corresponding political society. This, in other words, is a longer-term proposal with built in democratic checks and balances.

Here, the French philosopher takes inspiration from the work of the Committee to Frame a World Constitution, a group of scholars founded in 1945 at The University of Chicago, which included Maritain's friends Mortimer Adler and Chancellor Robert Hutchins. Like Maritain's articles in *Commonweal*, the Committee proposed a

---

<sup>26</sup> One could even apply Maritain's view to some fictional accounts of the future where the planet enters wider governmental systems with other worlds (e.g., the United Federation of Planets in the popular *Star Trek* series, Galactic Republic in *Star Wars*).

<sup>27</sup> Aurel Kolnai, "Between Christ and the Idols of Modernity," in *Privilege and Liberty and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 1999), 179.

<sup>28</sup> Kolnai, "Between Christ and the Idols of Modernity," 179.

<sup>29</sup> Emily Butler Finley, "Catholicism and Democratism: The Case of Jacques Maritain," *Journal of Church and State* 61, no. 3 (2019): 467, doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csy081.

<sup>30</sup> Butler Finley, "Catholicism and Democratism," 471.

<sup>31</sup> Butler Finley, "Catholicism and Democratism," 470.

federalist model of organizing a world state and released a *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution* in 1948.<sup>32</sup> While Maritain was not among the authors of this draft, members of the committee were in dialogue with his work and Catholic Thomistic philosophy as they proposed the creation of a world state.

In 1949, Hutchins delivered the Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University on *St. Thomas and the World State*. In the lecture, he cites Maritain and argues that “according to the mind of St. Thomas, only the world state can now be the perfect community.”<sup>33</sup> The creation of such a community, equipped with the power and enforceability of positive law, becomes even more urgent given the threats posed by nuclear weapons: “As war is inevitable in a world of sovereigns uncontrolled by positive law, so the destruction of civilization is inevitable if war breaks out after more than one nation has atomic weapons.”<sup>34</sup> Though not Catholic, Hutchins summarizes the church’s teachings and support for the idea of a global state and the tradition’s resistance to notions of absolute state sovereignty. “The Catholic tradition,” he argues, “points clearly toward the necessity of a world government. . . . Catholics . . . have always known that the society of nations can never be maintained in order and peace without the institution of positive law, giving determination, authority, and coercive power to the rule of natural law.”<sup>35</sup>

In the last chapter of *Man and the State*, Maritain is clear that he is offering a “political philosophy” in dialogue with the committee, and cites Hutchins’s text. Here, Maritain suggests two reasons for the development of a worldwide political society. The first is the growing economic interdependence of markets and the dangers such a system presents when deprived of a corresponding political society to regulate the international economy.<sup>36</sup> A second reason concerns the necessity to avert global warfare. With the advent of nuclear weapons, wars are no longer localized problems. Wars now have the ability to impact people around the world and can threaten humanity’s very existence. The choice, as he suggests, is “*either a lasting peace or a serious risk of total destruction*.”<sup>37</sup> This risk calls for the creation of spaces to meditate and resolve conflicts before they descend into war.

To help bring about this long-term project, Maritain proposes the creation of a “super-national advisory council.”<sup>38</sup> This expert body or

---

<sup>32</sup> Committee to Frame a World Constitution, *Preliminary Draft of a World Constitution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>33</sup> Robert Maynard Hutchins, *St. Thomas and the World State* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1949), 44.

<sup>34</sup> Hutchins, *St. Thomas and the World State*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Hutchins, *St. Thomas and the World State*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 191.

<sup>38</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 213.

think-tank would be separate from any existing structure, including the UN, and would not have any power, except “unquestionable moral authority.”<sup>39</sup> According to Maritain, this group could be nominated by institutions and governments and elected by the peoples of the world. The members of the council would give up their national citizenship so as to be free from the interests of their own state.<sup>40</sup>

Such a body would need to confront both sovereignty and Machiavellianism. For Maritain, the notion of state sovereignty is “intrinsically wrong” as it turns the instrument of the political society into a kind of person and end in itself.<sup>41</sup> This, he argues, is a perversion with negative repercussions both internally and externally. Internally, if the state is perceived as a sovereign being, there is the risk that the rights of citizens will be suppressed by totalitarianism. In democratic societies, these extremes are ideally checked by opposition parties, the press, and popular associations. Externally, in international relations, however:

there is nothing to check the trend of the modern States—to the extent to which they are infected with the Hegelian virus—toward supreme domination and supreme amorality, nothing except the opposite force of the other states. For there is no more powerful control, no organized international public opinion, to which these States can be submitted.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, absolute sovereignty places the state governments above both international law and the body politic. This concept allows for states to do what they want in international relations to protect their own self-interest (e.g., preventive war, torture) and avoid taking responsibility for humanitarian crises (e.g., Rwanda, Darfur). Ultimately, institutions grounded in this principle, such as the UN, are insufficient because they “cannot touch the root of the evil, and remain inevitably precarious and subsidiary, from the very fact that such institutions are organs created and put into action by the sovereign States, whose decisions they can only register.”<sup>43</sup>

Maritain’s sharp assessment of the dangers of absolute state sovereignty is linked to his concerns about Machiavellianism in international politics, where power and conquest are seen as the principal ends of politics. Such a conception, tied to false notions of sovereignty, can only lead to competitive and dangerous relations in

---

<sup>39</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 213.

<sup>40</sup> In some ways, the group of “Elders” founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007 has demonstrated the potential of such a group to address some of the key problems facing the planet. See “Who We Are,” The Elders, [www.theelders.org/who-we-are](http://www.theelders.org/who-we-are).

<sup>41</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 193.

<sup>43</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 193.

the world. In this model, ethics, morality, and justice can, and should be put aside in favor of the accumulation of power. Even in its less radical form of Realpolitik, Machiavellianism also leads to a “radical pessimism regarding human nature” and the distrust of others who might be trying to take power from you.<sup>44</sup>

With *Man and the State*, Maritain develops and expands his previous political vision to offer a thoughtful political philosophy that would endorse the creation of a democratic and pluralistic world state. Building on the proposals made by his colleagues at The University of Chicago and the experience of the post-war context, he offers another model for organizing the world going beyond the temptation to Machiavellianism and appeals to absolute state sovereignty: a model that looks at politics with a more positive, justice-informed conception of the person. For him the end of politics is not power, as Machiavelli would argue, but “the common good of a united people; which end is essentially something concretely human, therefore something ethical.”<sup>45</sup> To be effectively promoted and protected, this common good demands a more robust worldwide political society to be served by corresponding institutional structures, such as a world state.

While he remains grounded in Catholic Thomistic philosophy, Maritain eventually arrives at a universalistic approach that is a considerable development from the earlier European and Christian-centric models he proposed in the pages of *Commonweal*. In light of this development, how does his vision align with contemporary Catholic social teaching and the church’s engagement as a transnational entity directly involved in multilateral debates on the future of global governance?

## POPE FRANCIS AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF GOVERNANCE

Like Maritain, Pope Francis takes issue with modern conceptions of sovereignty, particularly as expressed in prevailing conceptions of borders. Unlike Maritain, however, Francis does not go as far as envisioning a world state in the singular. Rather, he advocates for more effective and equitable structures of global governance. This call for more robust forms of global governance appears in various ways throughout his pontificate, in formal encyclicals, World Day of Peace Messages, and meetings with governmental leaders. Whereas Maritain relies on a natural law foundation, Francis uses a more robustly scriptural basis with a key focus on universal siblinghood (fraternity/sorority). Here, he follows more than sixty years of Catholic social doctrine on the question of global governance. Around the same time as the publication of *Man and the State*, Pope Pius XII

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The End of Machiavellianism,” in *The Range of Reason*, 136.

<sup>45</sup> Maritain, “The End of Machiavellianism,” 142.

signaled his support for the UN and a more ambitious “world political organization . . . federal in form” as being in “harmony with the principles of social and political life so firmly founded and sustained by the church.”<sup>46</sup> Subsequent popes developed this teaching in their social encyclicals and speeches to the UN. In *Pacem in Terris*, for example, Pope John XXIII argues for the creation of a “public authority with power, organization, and means” to address, promote, and protect the “universal common good” (nos. 135 and 137). This was followed by similar calls to support an empowered universal public authority in *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 84), *Populorum Progressio* (no. 78) and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (no. 43).

In their visits to the UN General Assembly, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI offered, as Paul VI put it, “a solemn moral ratification of the work of the UN.”<sup>47</sup> In 2008, for example, Benedict XVI explicitly calls for the strengthening of the UN and endorses the emerging framework of the Responsibility to Protect, a humanitarian framework that offers an important challenge to absolute state sovereignty. Citing this address, in *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict is more explicit than his predecessors in supporting UN reform so that “the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth” (no. 67). Such a change would entail “*giving poorer nations an effective voice in shared decision-making*” and strengthening the UN’s “authority to ensure compliance with its decisions from all parties, and also with the coordinated measures adopted in various international forums” (no. 67). Absent such power, there is a risk that international law becomes “conditioned by the balance of power among the strongest nations” (no. 67).

In 2011, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace expanded on *Caritas in Veritate* with an official note calling for a reform of international financial systems. The text echoes many of the ideas developed by Maritain, making a compelling case for the need for an authority over globalization. “The time has come,” it reads, “to conceive of institutions with universal competence. . . . The conditions exist for going definitively beyond a ‘Westphalian’ international order in which States feel the need for cooperation but do not seize the opportunity to integrate their respective sovereignties for the common good of peoples.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than proposing the creation of a singular

---

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Drinan, “Pius XII’s Legacy to World Federalism,” 11. See also Emile Guerry, *The Popes and World Government* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1966).

<sup>47</sup> Paul VI, “Address to United Nations General Assembly,” October 4, 1965, [w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19651004\\_united-nations.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html).

<sup>48</sup> Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems*, 2011, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20111024\\_nota\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20111024_nota_en.html).

world state immediately, the text calls for several “sensible and realistic” steps, including taxes on international financial transactions, conditional recapitalization of national banks, and efforts to regulate and control the so-called shadow markets. The note concludes with a brief theological reflection on the Tower of Babel and its antithesis in the Pentecost experience, which should inspire Christians to go beyond division and “conceive of a new world with the creation of a world public Authority at the service of the common good.”<sup>49</sup>

Since the beginning of his papacy in 2013, Pope Francis, like his predecessors, has drawn attention to the need for more legitimate and authoritative structures to address the cross-border challenges that threaten the human family. His magisterial teachings frequently reference the need to welcome migrants and refugees, abolish nuclear weapons, build bridges across ethnic, national, and religious groups, and develop concerted strategies to respond to global challenges.

Unlike Maritain, however, Francis’s starting point is more scriptural and pastoral than philosophical. Since his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, the pope has appealed to the account of Cain and Abel to affirm the belief that all of us are brothers and sisters and have a solidaristic responsibility to each other regardless of nationality.<sup>50</sup> In 2015, he used St. Francis’s *Canticle of the Creatures* to extend this biblical notion of siblinghood to “Sister, Mother Earth” (no. 1).<sup>51</sup> Released in the preparatory phase to both the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Summit and the Paris Climate Conference, *Laudato Si’* addresses questions of global climate governance.<sup>52</sup> While chapter six calls for personal ecological conversion through ecological education and spirituality, chapter five focuses on the structural and political changes needed to address the crisis. Here, the text takes stock of many positive developments, including the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and reads almost like a memo to those involved in climate diplomacy.

Commenting on the difficulty of mobilizing change, Francis, like Benedict before him, speaks of the need to bolster the authority of legally binding instruments to ensure action and not only words. A voluntary system with few or no consequences for sovereign states that fails to live up to promises cannot adequately address the related

---

<sup>49</sup> Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems*.

<sup>50</sup> Pope Francis, “Homily on the Visit to Lampedusa,” July 8, 2013, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html).

<sup>51</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, *Encyclical Letter on Care for our Common Home*, May 24, 2015, nos. 1–2, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>52</sup> Sean McDonagh, *On Care for Our Common Home: The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment, Laudato Si’* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), xvii–xix.

crises of poverty and climate change. “Enforceable international agreements,” he writes, “are urgently needed, since local authorities are not always capable of effective intervention. Relations between states must be respectful of each other’s sovereignty but must also lay down mutually agreed means of averting regional disasters which would eventually affect everyone” (no. 173).

Several weeks later, Francis reiterated this call to action at the World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia. “There exists,” he stressed, “a clear, definite, and pressing ethical imperative to implement what has not yet been done. We cannot allow certain interests—interests which are global but not universal—to take over, to dominate states and international organizations, and to continue destroying creation.”<sup>53</sup> Importantly, Francis does not see the necessary change coming from the top-down, but rather issues a call to action for peoples, especially marginalized groups, to organize and hold political structures accountable.

Speaking to a very different audience, Francis followed this up in his address to the Sustainable Development Summit at the United Nations in September. The fourth pope to speak in the UN General Assembly Hall, Francis both praised the historic contribution of the organization and identified areas for reform. Like Benedict XVI, Francis is particularly concerned with the disproportionate power held by some states and conversely, the lack of power by other, less economically powerful nations. “All countries, without exception,” he insists, with a nod to the debates on reforming the UN Security Council, are entitled “a share in, and a genuine and equitable influence on, decision-making processes.”<sup>54</sup>

Just as UN member states were readying to adopt the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Francis’s address to the UN decried a “declarationist nominalism,” whereby countries make solemn commitments but fail to take concrete action. “Our world,” he stresses, “demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical, and constant.” Achieving this, however, requires that states and political leaders “set aside partisan and ideological interests, and sincerely strive to serve the common good.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements,” July 9, 2015, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150709\\_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html).

<sup>54</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization,” UN Headquarters, New York, September 25, 2015, [w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150925\\_onu-visita.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html).

<sup>55</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization.”

Five years later, amid the COVID pandemic, Francis again addressed the UN General Assembly, this time in a video message. Reflecting on the growing awareness of the interconnectedness and fragility of the human family exposed by COVID, he offers a call to action: “Solidarity must not be an empty word or promise.”<sup>56</sup> What is needed is a “change of direction.” The pope laments the lack of action on climate change and reiterates his warning concerning a “declarationist nominalism.” Instead, he urges a “a frank and coherent dialogue aimed at strengthening multilateralism and cooperation between states. The present crisis has further demonstrated the limits of our self-sufficiency as well as our common vulnerability. It has forced us to think clearly about how we want to emerge from this: either better or worse.”<sup>57</sup>

Not surprisingly, these same themes appear in *Fratelli Tutti*, his encyclical on fraternity and social friendship, released a few weeks after the video message.<sup>58</sup> The text again uplifts the notion of universal siblinghood, but this time uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to understand the universal obligations to others beyond borders. In chapter five, Francis echoes both the 2011 note and *Laudato Si'* (no. 189), bemoaning the failure of the international community to effectively and ethically respond to the economic crisis of 2007–2008. Rather than developing “new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth,” the response of the international community “fostered greater individualism, less integration, and increased freedom for the truly powerful, who always find a way to escape unscathed” (no. 170).

Citing *Caritas in Veritate* and Francis’s 2015 UN address, *Fratelli Tutti* critiques the unjust distribution of power in international relations (nos. 171 and 173). The authority of individual nation-states, especially poorer countries, is eroding in the face of powerful transnational interests. What is needed, according to the encyclical, is a “stronger and more efficiently organized” structure of global governance “equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty, and the sure defense of fundamental human rights” (no. 172).

---

<sup>56</sup> Pope Francis, “Video Message to the Seventy-Fifth Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations,” September 25, 2020, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200925\\_videomessaggio-onu.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200925_videomessaggio-onu.html).

<sup>57</sup> Pope Francis, “Video Message to the Seventy-Fifth Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations.”

<sup>58</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Encyclical letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship*, October 3, 2020, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

These themes appear again in 2023, with *Laudate Deum*, Francis's 2023 follow-up to *Laudato Si'*.<sup>59</sup> The exhortation, released before UN's Climate Conference in Dubai, offers a bold critique of the failures of the present system of global governance. "Our responses," he laments, "have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point" (no. 2). The previous models of governance, which he terms "old multilateralism" or "old diplomacy," have failed to generate an approach "capable of responding to the new configuration of the world" (no. 41). The infrastructure and norms which emerged following the Second World War, based on the sovereign state as the prime agent, must be reconfigured and recreated to take "into account the new world situation" (no. 37).

For Francis, this means supporting a more expansive and equitable order, built not from national capitals or the United Nations headquarters, but the bottom-up, a "multilateralism 'from below'" (no. 38). Without abandoning the structures of the state and intergovernmental bodies, Francis here points to the need for mobilizing and supporting civil society groups to be involved in "a sort of increased 'democratization' in the global context, so that various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all" (no. 43).

But just how is the world supposed to achieve this? As with Maritain, the pope could be criticized for being imprecise and not offering specific policy proposals to strengthen the system (e.g., what to do about the UNSC veto powers). As Anna Rowlands points out, however, the pope is "less interested in the careful demarcation of activities proper to the state, market, and society and more in tracing the wide human tendencies that are replicated across these arenas."<sup>60</sup> While not offering a clear-cut policy roadmap, Pope Francis and Jacques Maritain do offer several guiding values that have the potential to bridge some of the gaps in global governance today.

## BRIDGING THE GAPS

In many ways, the two figures considered in this paper represent complementary strands. Rooted in Thomistic political philosophy and informed by the experience of post-war reconstruction, Maritain offers

---

<sup>59</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, *Apostolic Exhortation to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis*, October 4, 2023, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html).

<sup>60</sup> Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 211.

a long-term vision with a world state as a goal. Meanwhile, Pope Francis, the first pope from Latin America, approaches the question from a more immediate, pastoral perspective. While he nods to longer term possibilities, Francis looks more to what needs to happen in the present to address the pressing realities facing real people. These two strands, the philosophical and the pastoral, converge to illuminate five values that frame a Catholic approach to global governance. These values, if promoted by the Catholic Church, have the potential to mobilize efforts to heal some of the gaps in global governance today.<sup>61</sup>

First, *both Maritain and Francis highlight the universal solidaristic vision embedded in the “catholic” political worldview.* This normative principle, whether rooted in Maritain’s claims of the universality of human rights or Francis’s appeal to shared siblinghood, looks towards a horizon wider than any one state or region. Like many forms of cosmopolitanism, this solidaristic value rejects appeals to absolute state sovereignty.

In order to make the UN system fit for purpose, the issue of sovereignty, which undergirds the declarationist nominalism that Francis decries, must be addressed. Both the emerging doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect and the development of the International Criminal Court, in different ways, reframe sovereignty more positively (as responsibility rather than strict non-intervention). Each of these efforts are however impeded by the lack of support by key nations, including the United States.

One of the most fundamental challenges, as Francis noted in 2015, is the inequity of power in the UN Security Council. Several unsuccessful attempts and proposals have been made, including limiting the veto power of the Permanent Five (P5) and introducing new permanent members from Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. Absent a global movement to reform the structures, it will be difficult to imagine the five victors of the Second World War giving up their power, even if such reforms, as former ambassador Kishore Mahbubani points out, would be in their best interest. The absence of reform, Mahbubani argues, will ultimately entail for the body a progressive loss of credibility.<sup>62</sup> Recently, in the context of seeking more support from African countries to counteract the influence of

---

<sup>61</sup> See also *Global Governance: Our Responsibility to Make Globalisation an Opportunity for All* (Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community, 2001), [www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/03/20010901-COMECE-Report-on-Global-Governance-22Our-responsability-to-make-globalisation-an-opportunity-for-all22.pdf](http://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/03/20010901-COMECE-Report-on-Global-Governance-22Our-responsability-to-make-globalisation-an-opportunity-for-all22.pdf); and Kevin Ahern, *An Introduction to Global Governance through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching* (Brussels: CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis, 2007), [www.cidse.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&Itemid=195&id=200\\_1d9500e121d2d35633b125dc0ca6f9aa&lang=en&task=download&view=item](http://www.cidse.org/index.php?option=com_k2&Itemid=195&id=200_1d9500e121d2d35633b125dc0ca6f9aa&lang=en&task=download&view=item).

<sup>62</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, “Civilizations: Fusion or Clash?,” in *Global Governance Futures*, 76–77.

Russia in the region, President Joseph Biden has indicated renewed support to reform both the UN Security Council and G20 network “to include permanent representation for Africa,” something slated for consideration by the UN in 2024.<sup>63</sup> While this would be a step in the right direction, how this will take shape and other countries/regions who have asked for greater representation (e.g., Brazil and India) will be included remains unclear.

Reframing sovereignty also demands a reappraisal of the role of borders, something increasingly urgent given the complexities posed by contemporary flows of refugees and migrants. A universal perspective on global migration governance looks at those crossing borders as siblings, and adopts a wider analysis to consider the complex mix of push and pull factors involved. This does not mean the elimination of borders, something neither Maritain nor Francis calls for, but rather a refocusing of the question on the vulnerability of those on the move, the root reasons for their displacement, and the responsibility of states to abide by the established norms of humanitarian law.

Addressing the crisis of global displacement, theologian David Hollenbach draws on the work of Daniel Philpott to suggest the beginning of a “third revolution in sovereignty.” Developments in humanitarian and human rights movements, he argues, have established norms that “imply that states not only have the responsibility to protect the dignity of their own citizens but also have transborder duties to respect the human rights of the citizens of other countries.”<sup>64</sup> So while there remain institutional and compliance gaps, there is a growing consensus on the importance of established humanitarian principles.

Here, the church’s responsibility to bridge doctrinal gaps between what it formally teaches and what individual members hear is particularly important in those countries with more political power. The church in the United States, United Kingdom, and France, the three P5 members with significant Catholic populations, has a particular responsibility to call for and support efforts for equitable and just reforms. Among other things, this includes strengthening monitoring and enforcement mechanisms related to already agreed

---

<sup>63</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden at the US-Africa Summit Leaders Session on Partnering on the African Union’s Agenda 2063,” The White House, December 15, 2022, [www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/12/15/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-u-s-africa-summit-leaders-session-on-partnering-on-the-african-unions-agenda-2063/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/12/15/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-u-s-africa-summit-leaders-session-on-partnering-on-the-african-unions-agenda-2063/).

<sup>64</sup> David Hollenbach, *Humanity in Crisis: Ethical and Religious Response to Refugees* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 66–67. See also Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

upon human rights and humanitarian law, strengthening support and funding for the United Nations and UN agencies, supporting efforts to reform the composition and privileges enjoyed by the P5, and resisting appeals to country-first nationalisms. The reflective disposition to universality at the heart of the Catholic tradition must continuously be integrated into church life, as the Second Vatican Council teaches (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 90).

Second, *both Maritain and Francis affirm the value of pluralism*. While it took Maritain time to arrive at possibilities for uniting groups with different religious and cultural heritages and going beyond a new European Christendom, his experiences after the war revealed the possibility of convening different groups for common tasks. Francis shares Maritain's optimism on the promise of pluralism and has deepened his predecessors' work on fostering ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, including the 2019 Abu Dhabi Declaration, *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. Co-signed with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the text rejects religiously-based violence and calls for action to advance fraternity and dialogue. In *Fratelli Tutti*, a whole chapter is dedicated to this project.

At the same time, Pope Francis has facilitated unprecedented ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation in addressing key issues on the global governance agenda. For example, ahead of the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) meeting in Scotland in 2021, the Holy See, along with the governments of Italy and the United Kingdom, convened a conference at the Vatican on "Faith and Science: Towards COP26." The meeting included representatives of more than nine religious traditions and UN officials and followed an earlier joint message on the protection of creation by Pope Francis, Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Bartholomew, the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch.<sup>65</sup>

Third, *for both Francis and Maritain, the structures of global governance should be multilayered, something the Catholic tradition describes with the language of subsidiarity*. Though occasionally framed through an anti-government libertarian lens, subsidiarity is not a principle against governmental intervention, but rather one that prioritizes the most appropriate and proximate level of governmental response. While the local level is often privileged, Catholic social teaching affirms that "when there is serious need at a greater distance or when a local community is not responding to the needs of its members, larger regional communities or the international community

---

<sup>65</sup> Philip Pullella, "Pope, Other Religious Leaders Issue Pre-COP26 Appeal on Climate Change," *Reuters*, October 4, 2021, [www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-world-religious-leaders-issue-pre-cop26-appeal-climate-change-2021-10-04/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-world-religious-leaders-issue-pre-cop26-appeal-climate-change-2021-10-04/).

as a whole can have a duty to respond.”<sup>66</sup> This call for different levels of government is evident in a remarkable way in the various efforts toward post-war European integration, a project which, as Anna Rowlands argues, had “solidarity and subsidiarity at its heart.”<sup>67</sup> Today, subsidiarity remains a key principle for the vision of Europe, appearing even in the unratified *European Constitution*.

Beyond the layers of local, national, regional, and global organizations, a range of other informal structures and networks have been created, including what Anne-Marie Slaughter describes as “horizontal networks,” such as the G20.<sup>68</sup> However, while promising in some respects, these evolving networks often have their own challenges in relation to participation, power distribution, and transparency. Though more flexible than some existing policies and institutions, the emergence of these networks alone cannot bridge the urgent institutional and policy gaps. Addressing these ruptures will demand a multipronged approach, or what Hollenbach describes as “a polycentric understanding of responsibility” where “no one community, country, or agency bears the responsibility to act all on its own. As polycentric and network-based, the responsibility is shared among local, regional, and global actors. When responsibility is seen as shared, the needed action becomes more likely.”<sup>69</sup>

Fourth, *both Francis and Maritain look for change from the bottom up through participation*. Like pluralism and subsidiarity, participation offers an important check to corruption, abuse of power or, in extreme cases, Machiavellian totalitarianism. For both figures, global structural change must “spring up from peoples.”<sup>70</sup> For Maritain, the future world order must be “fully political.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, a unified state structure can only come about once a general sense of a worldwide body politic is developed. Like his critics, Maritain knows that to impose something as significant as a world state from above would be an invitation to conflict. The formation of a body politic, of a worldwide political society, happens in a particular way as people join together in concrete common tasks with a shared sense of belonging.

In a similar way, the pope points to the need for people to join together to organize the necessary structural change. As Lisa Sowle Cahill acknowledges, it is almost revolutionary for Catholic social

---

<sup>66</sup> Hollenbach, *Humanity in Crisis*, 73.

<sup>67</sup> Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 219.

<sup>68</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Hollenbach, *Humanity in Crisis*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements.”

<sup>71</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 202.

teaching to arrive at the understanding “that effective political action must be broad-based and multi-layered, gathering energy and strength among affected populations,” and not primarily focused on the elites.<sup>72</sup> Using the successful example of the campaign against landmines as an example, *Laudate Deum* calls for a process that attends to the voices of citizens “that rise up from below throughout the world,” and “not simply one determined by the elites of power” (no. 38.) Accordingly, the structures of global governance must involve and engage a range of actors from grassroots popular movements and large non-governmental organizations to scholars, media platforms, religious leaders, transnational corporations, and governments. As Rowlands notes, Francis understands that the “best route out” of the present crisis “is to begin with a politics of attention from below: hearing the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. This is a political imperative for the sake of a common people in a common home.”<sup>73</sup>

Since the foundation of the UN system, Catholics have sought to do this bottom-up engagement by participating in global governance in ways that circumvent their national capitals through the creation of organized groups, movements, and networks in civil society. Significantly, the *UN Charter* recognized the demands of some groups and made provisions for granting consultative status to some non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Over the past eight decades, thousands of NGOs, including many Catholic groups, have contributed to the development of the present global governance system.

As *Fratelli Tutti* rightly points out, collectives within civil society, like these NGOs, “help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations” (no. 175). But the voices and experiences of those “globally governed” remain under-appreciated and far too often sidelined.<sup>74</sup> A new approach is needed with more accessible mechanisms and lines of communication to address this democratic deficit and foster a more participatory world order. Several proposals have advanced more ambitious forms of participatory structures, from the creation of a global parliament akin to the European Parliament to a new body within the UN system comprised of the mayors of major world cities. These and other proposals have the potential to help bridge the information and normative gaps afflicting the present world

---

<sup>72</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Social Justice and the Common Good: Improving the Catholic Social Teaching Framework,” in *Ethical Challenges in Global Public Health: Climate Change, Pollution, and the Health of the Poor*, ed. Philip J. Landrigan and Andrea Vicini, SJ, CTEWC Book Series 1 (2021): 112.

<sup>73</sup> Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion*, 211.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas G. Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson, “The Globally Governed—Everyday Global Governance,” *Global Governance* 24, no. 2 (2018): 193–210, doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02402003.

order.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, however, participation will require the interest and ability of an informed population, with particular option for the poor, for those people most vulnerable to the decisions made by higher levels of government.

If Francis is correct that the future of humanity depends on the ability of people to organize from the bottom up, then the Church needs to invest more time and resources into supporting the work of participatory structures such as social movements, NGOs, and community groups.<sup>76</sup> In the United States, the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has had enormous success in funding community organizing groups around the country.<sup>77</sup> An international fund for NGOs and movements that work on issues of global governance, akin to the work of CCHD, could go a long way to mobilize bottom-up participation.

Finally, *the Catholic moral vision shared by Jacques Maritain and Pope Francis remains centered on the human person*. In Maritain's personalist philosophy, the human person in all its integrated elements must be at the root of any legitimate form of governance. Important to Maritain's personalist democracy is his belief that the proper end of each person is God, not the state or the individual. For Maritain, the human being is much more than just the individual and the rights or material goods he or she possesses. The person has important spiritual and social dimensions which gives us a holistic understanding of human dignity and compels us to work and, if necessary, sacrifice for the common good.<sup>78</sup>

Francis consistently echoes the centrality of putting actual people first. In his 2015 address to the UN, he called states to engage in "an examination of conscience" that would consider the real experiences of living human beings: "In wars and conflicts there are individual persons, our brothers and sisters, men and women, young and old, boys and girls who weep, suffer, and die. Human beings who are easily discarded when our response is simply to draw up lists of problems, strategies, and disagreements."<sup>79</sup> In addressing migration during his 2016 visit to the border with the United States in Ciudad Juarez,

---

<sup>75</sup> Daniel Pejic and Michele Acuto, "Cities: Understanding Global Urban Governance," in *Global Governance Futures*, 107. See also Simon Curtis, *Global Cities and Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>76</sup> Pope Francis, "Address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements."

<sup>77</sup> See Jeffry Odell Korgen, *Beyond Empowerment: A Pilgrimage with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, in *Christianity and Democracy and The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1986), 88.

<sup>79</sup> Pope Francis, "Address to the Members of the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization."

Mexico, Francis made a similar point: “This crisis, which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families.”<sup>80</sup> As *Laudate Deum* points out, centering the global debate on the “primacy of the human person,” can engender an approach to multilateralism ensuring that “ethics will prevail over local or contingent interests” (no. 39). Here, again, is an area where the Catholic community can contribute by going beyond numbers to promoting a holistic vision that prioritizes the dignity of each human being.

As the largest faith-based educational provider on the planet, the Catholic Church has an enormous potential to influence public opinion to bridge some of the gaps inhibiting the present global governance infrastructure. The church, however, must contend with its own gaps, especially what might be described as a doctrinal gap between the official social doctrine and what is understood by its members and leaders. Catholics are not immune from temptations to various kinds of nationalisms. Education about the UN system and the church’s teaching on global governance ought to be integrated more clearly and intentionally into Catholic educational systems, seminary formation, and public outreach. Some places already do this by integrating official UN days into institutional and liturgical calendars, hosting Model UN clubs in schools, and educating students or parishioners about international campaigns, such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

While they intentionally do not offer a detailed road map for reconfiguring the present world order, Pope Francis and Jacques Maritain provide a set of values and principles that can assist collective discernment by the community of nations as they seek to address the existential threats facing people and the planet. At a time when humanity is confronted by both challenges that demand new forms of multilateralism and renewed expressions of nationalisms that oppose meaningful global cooperation, the values proposed by these two figures can offer timely guideposts to inspire action.

## CONCLUSION: NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE

At the beginning of the final chapter of *Man and the State*, Jacques Maritain quotes Mortimer Adler to lay out two possible paths ahead for the planet and its people: “either lasting peace or a serious risk of total destruction.”<sup>81</sup> Nearly seventy years later, during the COVID-19

---

<sup>80</sup> Pope Francis, “Homily” (Ciudad Juárez, February 17, 2016), [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160217\\_omelia-messico-ciudad-jaurez.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160217_omelia-messico-ciudad-jaurez.html).

<sup>81</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 189.

pandemic, Pope Francis made a similar point in his 2020 address to the UN General Assembly:

We are faced, then, with a choice between two possible paths. One path leads to the consolidation of multilateralism as the expression of a renewed sense of global co-responsibility, a solidarity grounded in justice and the attainment of peace and unity within the human family, which is God's plan for our world. The other path emphasizes self-sufficiency, nationalism, protectionism, individualism, and isolation; it excludes the poor, the vulnerable, and those dwelling on the peripheries of life. That path would certainly be detrimental to the whole community, causing self-inflicted wounds on everyone. It must not prevail.<sup>82</sup>

Ultimately, for both Jacques Maritain and Pope Francis, the answer is clear. We must resist nationalistic ideologies, strengthen existing mechanisms for multilateralism, and work towards the longer-term goal of creating a more robust, equitable and authoritative system of global governance. Contrary to what the critics of both figures allege, this is not a utopic vision, but rather a necessary step for our common world because whether we like it or not, we are all “in the same boat” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 30). **M**

**Kevin Glauber Ahern, PhD**, is Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Dorothy Day Center at Manhattan College, where he has also directed the Peace and Justice Studies and Labor Studies programs. He is the author of *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good*. He has edited several books, including the award-winning *Visions of Hope: Emerging Theologians and the Future of the Church*, *The Radical Bible*, and the award-winning *Public Theology and the Global Common Good*. His most recent book is *God's Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond*. He serves as co-chair of the Dorothy Day Guild Advisory Committee, and has held leadership roles in the International Movement of Catholic Students as well as the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (ICMICA-Pax Romana), a global movement of intellectual and professionals committed to social action.

---

<sup>82</sup> Pope Francis, “Video Message to the Seventy-Fifth Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations.”