

“How Can We Abandon Them?” The Legacy of Pope Francis on Right-Wing Populism

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Abstract: In recent decades, a novel right-wing nationalist and populist tendency has emerged on a global scale, frequently framing Christian identity as one of its central pillars. This article explores the relationship between right-wing populism and Christianity, by addressing how populism considers the role of religion on the one hand, and how Christianity position itself in relation to populism on the other hand, with a specific focus on Pope Francis’s social thought. Although the relationship between right-wing populism and Christianity appears to be ambivalent, the response of Pope Francis, as elaborated in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, is not. In the section entitled “A Better Kind of Politics,” the distinction between the “popular” and “populist leader” is employed as a hermeneutical tool to investigate current political developments. Furthermore, it enables us to respond to the allegation that Francis himself could be considered a populist, as some claim, referring to his alleged affinities with the political culture associated with Peronism. In his interpretation of the notion of political love as delineated in *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis leaves us with a legacy regarding the ethical response of Christians to populism, promoting instead a “culture of encounter” and a “better kind of politics.”

IN *THE WAY OUT*, THE SOUTH AFRICAN POET UYS KRIGE TELLS A personal story that occurred during the Second World War.¹ As a young captain in the South African army, he was captured in Cyrenaica and subsequently transferred to the prison camp of Sulmona in the Abruzzi, a region in south-central Italy, along with thousands of other Allied prisoners. After the armistice of September 8, 1943, they escaped and dispersed to the nearby mountains in a

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¹ Uys Krige, *The Way Out: The Italian Intermezzo* (Collins, 1946).

desperate attempt to escape German raids and cross the front line. Krige provides a poignant account of the courage and solidarity of the Abruzzi shepherds and their poor families who, at the risk of their own lives, disguised the fugitives as fellow shepherds and led them along the transhumance trails toward southern Italy.

Krige did not hesitate to affirm, as Ignazio Silone wrote, that this time spent with the Abruzzi shepherds was life-changing, as it gave him a glimpse into “the possibility of absolutely pure and disinterested human relations.”² A farmer and his family, for example, hosted Krige and two other escapees for more than a month, even after part of the farm had been requisitioned by the Germans. Later, Krige and his comrades found refuge in the small village of Roccasale. Despite the presence of many ex-prisoners, the whole population was assisting them, although German propaganda clearly indicated that this kind of help might be punished with death penalty.

For both the Abruzzese shepherds and the escaped soldiers, the attempt to cross the front line was fraught with danger. German soldiers could have spotted them and easily unmasked the false shepherds, which would have resulted in reprisals against the civilian population. One night around the fire, not expecting to be overheard, the shepherds talked about the dangers of crossing the front with so many false shepherds. Sharing their concerns, Krige was about to come out and announce that he and the other ex-prisoners would face the danger alone, when one of the shepherds said: “We brought these men all the way here. They are foreigners. They don’t know the mountain. How can we abandon them? We are Christians, aren’t we?” At this remark, no one objected, and the march continued successfully, the Germans having already evacuated that section of the front.³

Krige’s account significantly shows how the reaction of the shepherds and their families in rescuing the former prisoners was rooted in their self-identification as Christians. Presently, more than eighty years later, our world faces divisive conflicts and the reemergence of nationalisms which confront us with the same question posed by the shepherd. We observe a new right-wing nationalist and populist tendency across the globe, characterized by an exclusionary discourse that delineates a dichotomy between “us” and “them.” In doing so, it often establishes Christian identity as one of its fundamental principles. As a result, populism and nationalism pose a significant challenge to Christians worldwide, prompting a critical

² Ignazio Silone, *L'avventura d'un povero cristiano* (Mondadori, 2010), 16 (our translation).

³ Silone, *L'avventura d'un povero cristiano*, 17–18.

examination of their possible responses.⁴ Will they opt for a closed identity, thereby retreating within their own safe space and walls, which, in turn, supports the exclusionary rhetoric and dynamics of populism? Or will they prefer an open identity that embraces the risk of the encounter, embodied by an attitude of hospitality to welcome “others” and the openness to be enriched through the mutual exchange, as the shepherd did? In this article, we argue that the legacy of Pope Francis is unambiguous: his radical plea for an open Catholicism includes a self-evident answer to the shepherd’s question, “How can we abandon them?”

The analysis is structured around three key questions: first, what is populism’s critique of and response to current challenges; second, what role does religion in general, and Christianity in particular, play in contemporary populist movements; and three, what response to populism is offered by one particular Christian tradition, namely Catholicism through the voice of the late Pope Francis? Hence, after analyzing the ambivalent relationship between right-wing populism and Christianity, this article explores the view of Catholic social thought on populism, focusing in particular on the vision of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. After exploring Francis’s important distinction between “popular” and “populist” as a discerning tool to identify a “better kind of politics” oriented towards the common good, we argue that the encyclical’s idea of political love can help to develop an ethical response to populism’s exclusionary dynamic.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULIST WORLDVIEWS: BETWEEN BELONGING AND EXCLUSION

While debates surround the concept of populism, we take as our starting point the widely accepted definition of populism forwarded by Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, who describes populism as a “thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁵ As a

⁴ Drawing on Henri Bergson’s distinction between “static” and “dynamic” religions, the theologian Wolfgang Palaver considers how religions respond to populism. Inspired by this article, we discuss closed versus open religious identities, focusing particularly on the response of Catholicism. See Wolfgang Palaver, “Fraternity Versus Parochialism: On Religion and Populism,” *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 319, doi.org/10.3390/rel11070319.

⁵ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39 (2004): 543, doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x. For some discussion on the concept, see Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, “Populism Versus Democracy,” *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 405–424, doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x; Benjamin

“thin ideology,” it can be aligned with other ideologies on both the left and right side of the political spectrum, such that populism does not constitute a monolithic bloc. In Europe, multiple *populist families* exist.⁶ Left-wing populist movements—such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise and Podemos in Spain—play a role, as do anti-establishment “centrist” parties like the *Cinque stelle* movement in Italy. However, the main focus of this article is on right-wing populisms as they are currently gaining increasing political dominance globally. Their electoral success exerts a significant influence on mainstream political discourse, implicitly urging the latter to respond, for instance by shifting more toward the right, by the adoption of increasingly restrictive immigration policies and national identity-related measures. Pascal Perrineau considers this right-wing populism a reaction to the disarray and anxieties of an open society characterized by the globalization of economic exchanges, increasing migration flows, and the loss of traditional points of reference.⁷ These transformations have led many people to retreat into a closed society, providing substantial support to the leaders of contemporary nationalist-populism, who are in direct opposition to those who adapt to globalization and multiculturalism.

Right-wing populists respond to these societal shifts by presenting themselves as defenders of the people, constructing barriers between groups perceived as antagonists while simultaneously reinforcing a strong sense of belonging and community. This exclusionary logic is manifest in the way right-wing populism constructs multiple cleavages within society, as analyzed by communication scientist Benjamin De Cleen, political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis, and sociologist Rogers Brubaker.⁸ They argue that right-wing populism thrives on creating two different cleavages between “us” and “them,”

Moffit, *The Global Rise of Populism* (Stanford University Press, 2016); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Penguin Books, 2017); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme: Histoire, théorie, critique* (Éditions du Seuil, 2020); Nadia Urbinati, *Io, il popolo. come il populismo trasforma la democrazia* (Il Mulino, 2020); Felipe Carreira da Silva and Julius Rogenhofer, “Populist Things: A Study on the Materiality of Political Ideas,” *Sociology Compass* 17, no. 3 (2023), doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13066.

⁶ Gilles Ivaldi, “Les populismes aux élections européennes de 2019: Diversité idéologique et performances électorales,” *Fondation Jean Jaurès* (2020): 2–6, jean-jaurès.org/publication/les-populismes-aux-elections-europeennes-de-2019-diversite-ideologique-et-performances-electorales/.

⁷ Pascal Perrineau, *Le populisme* (Que sais-je?, 2021), 78–79 (our translation).

⁸ Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism,” *Javnost: The Public* 24 (2017): 301–319, doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1330083; Rogers Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191–1226.

not just *vertically* between the people and the elites, but also *horizontally*, creating antagonistic relationships between the homogenous community of “we, the people” and the other “enemies of the people.” This latter category includes a range of vulnerable groups, such as the unemployed, undocumented migrants, and ethnic and religious minorities.

The current rise of right-wing populism is often associated with emotions.⁹ In public and media discourse, the equation between populism and affectivity serves not only to explain the success of mainly right-wing populism, but also to discredit both its ideology and adherents on the assumption that emotions and affectivity are incompatible with rationality. It is thus forgotten that affectivity is constitutive of rationality and that the political sphere is inherently not merely rational but also affective because it deals with what we care about¹⁰—and thus, with emotions.¹¹ Hence, according to the political philosopher Jan-Werner Müller, we should be careful not to fall into “psychologizing diagnoses,” which fail to take ordinary people seriously and forget that anger and frustration are “not ‘just emotions’, but can also have *reasons*.”¹² However, analyses on the relationship between emotions and populism tend to focus on *dissociative* emotions, namely emotions from the “fear family”—such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, powerlessness—and emotions from the “anger family”—such as anger, rage, outrage, resentment, ressentiment, indignation.¹³ Fear appears to be one of the crucial emotions, emerging as both *cause* and *effect* of the rise of populism in society, since “populism stokes fear and is strengthened by its increase.”¹⁴ The consequences of the politics of fear embodied by right-wing populism

⁹ Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve, “Emotional Roots of Right-Wing Political Populism,” *Social Science Information* 56, no. 4 (2017): 567–595, doi.org/10.1177/0539018417734419.

¹⁰ Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, “The Affects of Populism,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2022): 2, doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.56.

¹¹ Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín, “Introduction: Populism, Democracy, and the Logic of Passion,” in *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity*, ed. Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín (Routledge, 2019), 5, doi.org/10.4324/9781351205474-1.

¹² Müller, *What is Populism?*, 16.

¹³ The distinction between “dissociative” and “associative” emotions is inspired by Tietjen’s conceptualization of “associative” and “dissociative” (or antagonistic) political paradigms: Tietjen, “The Affects of Populism,” 8–9; see also Guillem Rico, Marc Guinjoan, and Eva Anduiza, “The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism: How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes,” *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (2017): 444–461, doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12261; Nicolas Demertzis, “Populisms and Emotions,” in *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity*, ed. Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespín (Routledge, 2019), 31–48, doi.org/10.4324/9781351205474-3.

¹⁴ Palaver, “Populism and Religion,” 22.

are manifold. These include the denial of social and cultural pluralism, the separation between a positive “we” and a despised “other,” the emergence of solidarity between members of one group that leads to hostility towards outsiders, the rise of new walls, and the tendency to scapegoat people who are blamed for being responsible for the crises which provoke fear.¹⁵ As such, the focus on fear evokes a sense of crisis and urgency. In contrast, the emotions of the “anger family” emphasize moral anger and responsibility attribution directed to the “establishment” or “elite,” which is held morally responsible by the people for their perceived grievances.¹⁶ In this framework, the role played by *associative* emotions, such as sympathy, love, compassion, and hope, which are equally important for understanding the phenomenon of populism, is surprisingly neglected. They are mobilized by populist actors in order to create an inspiring narrative for their constituency and offer a sense of belonging and identity. They are based on a fundamental idea of commonality, whereby individuals establish connections through what they have in common, rather than through conflict and blame attribution.¹⁷ In short, in light of this article’s focus, the exclusionary tendency of right-wing populist discourse and politics is of crucial significance. Faced with political, social, economic and ecological challenges, this populism makes a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders, resulting in a plea for, or policy of, local or national protectionism aimed at safeguarding one group at the expense of another.

RIGHT-WING POPULISMS AND RELIGION

A discussion of the relationship between religion and populism is necessarily bidirectional, analyzing religion from the perspective of the populist group and vice versa. With regard to the first, political scientists Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell point out how right-wing populists portray society “in Manichean terms as divided into a good ‘us’ and a bad (even ‘evil’) ‘them’” and use religions “to define who belongs within the category of ‘us.’”¹⁸ According to contemporary academic analysis,¹⁹ three basic types of relationship can be distinguished between right-wing populism and religion:

¹⁵ See Palaver, “Populism and Religion,” 22–24.

¹⁶ Tietjen, “The Affects of Populism,” 9.

¹⁷ Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2019).

¹⁸ Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell, “Populism and Religion,” in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, ed. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy (Hurst & Co., 2016), 2.

¹⁹ Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morieson, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions,” *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 272, doi.org/10.3390/rel12040272.

identitarian populism, sacralization of politics, and politicization of religion. The so-called “identitarian populism” defines “the people” and the “others” in primarily religious and civilizational terms. According to Brubaker, the present times are not “simply populist” but “*national-populist*” and should be understood in “civilizational terms,” as a reaction to Islam.²⁰ In Western Europe, for instance, right-wing populists embrace Christianity in order to assert their identity in opposition to other religions, in particular Islam.²¹

Alliances with religion, especially when understood as an identitarian and “civilizational” factor (leading to a religion-based classification and polarization), allows populists to utilize the emotions of the public to support their “exclusionary narratives” in multiple ways. Concretely, it can fuel anger towards elites accused of threatening the (religious and/or civilizational) identity of the people, or fear of the “other” who is different (from a religious point of view). At the same time, the alliance between right-wing populism and religion can also arouse emotions such as love for one’s homeland and nostalgia for a perceived glorious or more socially cohesive past.²² For example, the Spanish party Vox has adopted the slogan “Hacer a España grande otra vez” (“Make Spain great again”)—echoing US President Donald Trump’s MAGA slogan—while invoking the notion of “Reconquista,” a concept deeply tied to Spain’s Christian past and the historical struggle against Muslim rule. The party stirs up national pride and links a mythologized past with contemporary national identity.²³ In Italy, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega party, has made repeated appeals to Europe’s Christian roots and has displayed religious symbols in an attempt to reassure an electorate unsettled by social change and anxious about the future.²⁴ These dynamics illustrate how populism feeds on and profits from its link with religion and the emotions associated with it.

Secondly, the “sacralization of politics” occurs when populism takes on a religious character through its rhetorical narrative, symbols,

²⁰ Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism,” 1191–1193; José Casanova, “Transnationalism and Religion: The European Union, from Christian-Democratic Project, to Secular Cosmopolitanism, to Populist ‘Christian’ Neo-Nationalism,” in *Religion and Neo-Nationalism in Europe*, ed. Florian Höhne and Torsten Meireis (Nomos, 2020), 29–48, doi.org/10.5771/9783748905059-27.

²¹ Olivier Roy, “Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts, the Churches and the Concept of a Christian Europe,” in *Saving the People*, 186.

²² Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morieson, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions,” 272.

²³ Tiago João Queimada e Silva, “The Reconquista Revisited: Mobilising Medieval Iberian History in Spain, Portugal and Beyond,” in *The Crusades in the Modern World*, ed. Mike Horswell and Akil N. Awan (Routledge, 2020), 57–74.

²⁴ Iacopo Scaramuzzi, *Dio? In fondo a destra. Perché i populismi sfruttano il cristianesimo* (Emi: 2020), 25.

and rituals.²⁵ As the political scientist José Pedro Zúquete argues, the “sacralization of politics” is a process that “happens when politics acquires a transcendent nature” and is no longer perceived as a mere worldly affair, but “as a tool for total change . . . that galvanizes group solidarity and gives ultimate meaning to the life and destiny of communities.”²⁶ The sacralization of politics is a typically Western phenomenon that is inextricably linked to the process of secularization of society. Within this theoretical framework, populism functions as a surrogate religion and tends to fill a religious “vacuum” in a secular society.²⁷ Religion can provide populist discourses with a variety of symbols and insights that are useful for constructing the group identity through an emotionally engaging and moralizing narrative.²⁸ These may involve the sacralization of the people against the enemies, a narrative of election, a politics of redemption to achieve salvation in this world, and the idealization of the charismatic leader.

Thirdly, the “politicization of religion” or so-called “religious populism”²⁹ enables populist leaders and movements to instrumentalize religion in order to sanctify and legitimize the political goals of a movement or party against their enemies. According to this approach, the doctrine, writings, and ethics of a particular religious tradition are essential to the populist agenda and action attached to it.³⁰ Zúquete contends that this approach is not exclusive to any religious tradition and cuts across denominational differences, as demonstrated by examples as diverse as the US-based Protestant People’s Party in the 1890s, the rise of Islamism as an “extreme politicization,” the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, and the ultra-Orthodox Israeli political party Shas.³¹

As demonstrated by this framework, the instrumentalization of religion by populist movements and parties is a contextual and situational phenomenon. The use of and reference to Christianity, for

²⁵ José Pedro Zúquete, “Populism and Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. C. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 445–466, doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.22; Daniel N. DeHanas and Marat Shterin, “Religion and the Rise of Populism,” *Religion, State & Society* 46, no. 3 (2018): 177–185, doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1502911.

²⁶ Zúquete, “Populism and Religion,” 450.

²⁷ Zúquete, “Populism and Religion,” 450.

²⁸ Efe Peker, “Finding Religion: Immigration and the Populist (Re)Discovery of Christian Heritage in Western and Northern Europe,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 158, doi.org/10.3390/rel13020158.

²⁹ Yilmaz and Morieson, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions,” 272.

³⁰ Zúquete, “Populism and Religion,” 446; Yilmaz and Morieson, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions,” 272.

³¹ Zúquete, “Populism and Religion,” 447–449; see also Yilmaz and Morieson, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions,” 272.

example, will vary significantly across the globe, and even within a single continent. To take Europe as an example: while Western Europe will typically exhibit a more pronounced “identitarian populist” dynamic, Eastern European nations, such as Hungary under Orbán, will demonstrate a tendency towards a “politicization of Christianity.” Subsequently the question arises how religious people, inspired by their religion, respond to these political tendencies, which leads us to the second perspective.

Looking at contemporary populism and examining the interplay between populism and Christianity, two tendencies become visible. First, in some regions and countries, Christian movements, churches, and individual leaders have aligned with populism, as evidenced for instance by Christian nationalism in the US, Hungary, and Germany, or in Brazil under former president Jair Bolsonaro. In the European context, the Catholic Church in countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland has since 2015 increasingly supported populist parties.³² In the Czech Republic, for example, Cardinal Dominik Duka has publicly expressed admiration for Viktor Orbán and his critique of liberal democracy. According to Czech historian and priest Tomáš Petráček, the Catholic Church in Central Europe has undergone a conservative shift over the past decade, adopting a critical stance on issues such as immigration, the perceived Islamization of society, and gender ideology.³³ Moreover, most Czech bishops have dissociated themselves from Pope Francis, while expressing profound veneration for the figure of Benedict XVI, Petráček argues.

At the same time, however, there is an increasing expression of church-based opposition to this kind of exclusivist populism. For instance, the German bishops have made a concerted effort to distinguish their own positions from those of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in the 2024 European elections, declaring in their official statement that racial nationalism and Christianity are “incompatible.”³⁴ The German bishops have issued a formal statement opposing the rise of “right-wing extremism and right-wing populist movements,” which “currently poses the greatest

³² Lukáš Macek, “Between Francis and Viktor, the Tugs and Pulls Among Central European Catholics,” *Institut Jacques Delors*, institutdelors.eu/en/publications/entre-francois-et-viktor-les-tiraillements-des-catholiques-centre-europeens/.

³³ Tomáš Petráček, “Cechia: da Chiesa europea a Chiesa identitaria,” *Settimana News*, January 29, 2024, settimananews.it/chiesa/cechia-da-una-chiesa-europea-a-una-chiesa-identitaria/.

³⁴ German Bishops’ Conference, “Racial (völkisch) Nationalism and Christianity are Incompatible,” Resolution of the Plenary Assembly of the German Bishops’ Conference, February 22, 2024, humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/chieselocali/2024/dichiarazione-germano-elezioni/2024-023a-engl-Anlage1-Pressbericht-Erklärung-der-deutschen-Bischoefe.pdf.

extremist threat to our country and to Europe.”³⁵ Considering the historical roots of extremism, they have also expressed support for those who oppose these movements, explicitly showing their appreciation for Christians who join the protests. Interpreting the nation as an *ethnos* rather than a *demos* leads right-wing populism toward exclusionary extremism and “social patriotism,” which stands in contrast to the Church’s view on the equal and inviolable human dignity of all, and the universal solidarity which accompanies it.³⁶ The bishops do not hesitate to explicitly identify the AfD, delineating its position at the intersection of right-wing extremism and a more moderate form of right-wing populism. These views are “incompatible with the Christian image of God and man. [Therefore,] right-wing extremist parties and those that are rampant on the fringes of this ideology cannot be a place of political activity for Christians and cannot be voted for. Moreover, the dissemination of right-wing extremist slogans—including racism and anti-Semitism in particular—is incompatible with professional or voluntary service in the Church.”³⁷

Subsequently, in March 2024, the European Bishops’ Conference (COMECE), the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, and two ecumenical networks (the Conference of European Churches and Together for Europe) published a joint ecumenical declaration: “Europe, Be Yourself!”³⁸ Its starting point is both the “crisis of values in the European area” and the neglect of Christian values in EU politics, which has led to the spread of misconceptions and the misuse of Christianity. The authors express concern about how fear is leading people to seek refuge in “an objectified and instrumentalized version of tradition, sometimes disguised as an appeal to ‘traditional values.’”³⁹ They further refer to the “weaponization” of notions such as “homeland” and “religion.”⁴⁰ The public forum is characterized by division, polarization, and disinformation. Conversely “parallel monologues” (echoing *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 200) prevail in closed groups

³⁵ German Bishops’ Conference, “Racial (völkisch) Nationalism and Christianity,” 1.

³⁶ German Bishops’ Conference, “Racial (völkisch) Nationalism and Christianity,” 2.

³⁷ German Bishops’ Conference, “Racial (völkisch) Nationalism and Christianity,” 3. However, the bishops also explicitly state that the challenges and problems that increase the attraction to those movements have to be tackled, and that the Church remains open to dialogue with those who feel attracted to this ‘ideology.’

³⁸ COMECE, Conference of European Churches, Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, and Together for Europe, “Europe, Be Yourself! Ecumenical Declaration in View of the 2024 EU Elections: Address to the European Institutions, MEP Candidates and Political Parties,” March 20, 2024, comece.eu/ecumenical-declaration-in-view-of-the-2024-eu-elections-europe-be-yourself/.

³⁹ COMECE et al., “Europe, Be Yourself!,” 1.

⁴⁰ COMECE et al., “Europe, Be Yourself!,” 1.

where no counternarrative exists—or, even worse, is permitted. Although the signatories do not explicitly reference any specific political party or faction, their stance is unambiguous in their call to politicians and political groups to “fight against the instrumentalization of Christian values for political interests and in the perspective of ethno-racial narratives.”⁴¹

In their statement, “A New Lease of Life for Europe,” eight bishops of four bordering countries in Western Europe (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and Germany) express concern over the viability of Europe’s historical solidarity and integration, partly attributable to the rise of “widespread” nationalism and populism. This risks that “as in other times, the other or foreigner will once again be treated as a threat.”⁴² While acknowledging the challenges that multiculturalism and migration pose for Europe, these bishops remind Catholics that “the European Community was born of a project of peace that succeeded in reconciling former enemies that have now become brothers.”⁴³ They express their belief that co-existence in diversity is indeed possible, but its realization implies “resisting the temptation to close in on oneself”⁴⁴—thus their criticism regarding the exclusionary dynamics of populism and nationalism.

As evidenced by these European examples, there is no uniform or international response of “the” Catholic Church. Rather, there are a variety of Catholic responses, influenced by different contextual factors, including the relationship with politics at the local level, as well as internal divisions within the Catholic Church itself. In view of this observation, it is pivotal to examine the point of view of the highest magisterium of the Catholic Church—that is, papal teaching. Hence the question: What legacy has the papacy of Pope Francis left us?

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND POPULISM: THE LEGACY OF POPE FRANCIS

The term “populism” has been a prominent feature of Pope Francis’s papacy, marking an unprecedented level of attention in the history of the Roman Magisterium. In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pontiff made a call for political action aimed at achieving a fairer distribution of public resources. However, the

⁴¹ COMECE et al., “Europe, Be Yourself,” 2.

⁴² Euregio Bishops, “A New Lease of Life for Europe: Pastoral Letter of the Euregio Bishops for the Elections of the 9th of June 2024,” 5, [ettre-pastorale-euregio-version-anglaise.pdf](#)

⁴³ Euregio Bishops, “A New Lease of Life,” 6.

⁴⁴ Euregio Bishops, “A New Lease of Life,” 6.

Pope also made it clear that he was explicitly rejecting any form of “irresponsible populism” (no. 204). In the subsequent initial years of his pontificate, Pope Francis exercised caution in formulating an overall judgment on the phenomenon, given the varied interpretations of the term in both Latin America and Europe. In this sense, he stated that he “had to relearn this word in Europe.”⁴⁵ The pontiff came to interpret populism as an authoritarian temptation in a time marked by the crisis of democracy. This populism is characterized by a “political paternalism,” guided by the motto “Everything for the people, nothing with the people.” This is in contrast with “popularism,” which Pope Francis understands as a politics of fraternity conceived “not *just* for the people, but *with* the people.”⁴⁶

Notwithstanding these earlier and later references to populism, *Fratelli Tutti* includes Francis’s primary and most comprehensive magisterial formulation on this phenomenon. Its importance is twofold: it provides the most systematic elaboration of Pope Francis’s thought on the subject, and additionally it is of greater magisterial rank, as it is contained in an encyclical, so that this thought becomes an integral part of official Catholic social teaching.⁴⁷

How does the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* address the issue of populism? The analysis consists of three main paragraphs. First, we will deal with the first chapter of *Fratelli Tutti*, entitled “Dark Clouds

⁴⁵ In an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El País* in January 2017, Francis stated that populism “is a misleading term” (“una palabra equívoca”), because in Latin America it refers to popular movements and has a positive political meaning as an expression of the protagonism of the people, while in Europe it is identified with mass movements based on the fear of the other, which in times of crisis have led to totalitarian regimes, in particular to Nazism, defined as “the most typical example of populism in the European sense of the term.” Antonio Caño and Pablo Ordaz, “Pope Francis: ‘El peligro en tiempos de crisis es buscar un salvador que nos devuelva la identidad y nos defienda con muros,’” *El País*, January 22, 2017, elpais.com/internacional/2017/01/21/actualidad/1485022162_846725.html (our translation).

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, “Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the International Conference ‘A Politics Rooted in the People,’” April 15, 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210415_videomessaggio-conferenza-londra.html. In his message, Pope Francis equates “popularism” with the concept of “inclusive populism” developed by Angus Ritchie, director of the Centre for Theology and Community in London, in his book *Inclusive Populism: Creating Citizens in the Global Age* (University Notre Dame Press, 2019).

⁴⁷ Although populism might appear to be a secondary theme—the term “populism” and its derivatives (“populist” and “populists”) appear only twelve times in the text—sociologist Paolo Segatti contends that it “runs like an underground river throughout the encyclical,” from its opening pages, which describe the signs of a divided society in which particularisms prevail and the “social sense” (no. 11) has been lost, being “at the very heart of the concerns that motivated its drafting.” Paolo Segatti, “Il problema del populismo in *Fratelli Tutti*,” *Humanitas: rivista bimestrale di cultura* 77, no. 4 (2022): 532.

Over a Closed World.” In this chapter, Pope Francis analyzes the present world and its political and social challenges. Second, since populism is both a political manifestation and a response to this context, the ensuing discussion addresses the encyclical’s view on populism and politics, exploring Francis’s interesting distinction between the populist leader and the popular leader. Third, we delve into his response, which calls for “social and political charity” as a central feature of the “better politics” advocated by Pope Francis in the encyclical. This perspective has broader implications for Francis’s stance on the role of Christianity in general, and Christians themselves in particular, in addressing today’s challenges.

FRATELLI TUTTI AND THE “SHADOWS” OF TODAY’S WORLD

In the first chapter of the encyclical, entitled in Italian “Le ombre di un mondo chiuso,” literally translated as “dark shadows of a closed world,”⁴⁸ Pope Francis undertook a diagnosis of the contemporary situation, pointing to exclusionary dynamics engendered by a closed world. The starting point of the reflection is the observation that history is “showing signs of a certain regression” (no. 11). The encyclical sets forth a long series of obscure phenomena. These include the reemergence of “ancient conflicts” that were previously believed to have been overcome, the spread of narrow-minded nationalism, the paradox of an increasingly globalized society that “makes us neighbors, but does not make us brothers [and sisters]” (no. 12), growing social inequalities, and the “new forms of cultural colonization” that tend to erase the roots and traditions of a people. Furthermore, the loss of meaning of terms such as “democracy, freedom, justice or unity” (no. 14) is also a factor that must be considered. These terms have been denatured and deformed to the point that they are used as “tools for domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action” (no. 14). Pope Francis addresses the underlying, grounding emotion behind these phenomena, namely, fear. In paragraph 39, for instance, Francis highlights the correlation between migration and the spread of fear and anxiety, which are often stirred up for political purposes. This dynamic contributes to the rise of xenophobic attitudes, which have the effect of delegitimizing migrants and disregarding their inherent human dignity.

⁴⁸ It is noteworthy that in the official English text, the title is translated as “Dark Clouds Over a Closed World.” While seemingly insignificant, the distinction is important, because “clouds” may give the impression that Francis is talking about shifting phenomena affected by external, uncontrollable elements, while the idea of “shadows” alludes to a causal relationship between the closed world(s) human beings inhabit and their effect.

Fratelli Tutti's first chapter also invites us to zoom out of particular situations and social issues, encouraging us to recognize the general tendency behind them, namely the exclusionary dynamic that is rooted in and leads to divisions between "us" and "them." Francis describes this dynamic through the metaphor of "walls."⁴⁹ The physical, but also mental and symbolic, walls advocated by populisms have their roots in a number of factors, including the crisis of our globalized world, the traumatic effects of 9/11, the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, and the migration crisis. In paragraph 27, Pope Francis warns against the "temptation to build a culture of walls" in order to protect oneself and avoid the risk of encountering the other, the unknown, whose otherness is perceived as a threat to *my* existence. Rather than being liberating, the culture of walls imprisons individuals within their own fears. As he observes, this renders individuals "slaves within the very walls they have built," leaving them isolated and "without horizons, for they lack this interchange with others" (no. 27).

In this sense, fear is both the *cause* of walls, insofar as they are built to defend against external threats, and their *effect*, since in a society fortified with defensive walls, closed towards the outside world, suspicion and fear of those who are beyond the barriers will tend to grow. This inevitably results in the establishment of new walls to seek protection from enemies. In this manner, a vicious circle is created between fear and exclusion, which poses a significant threat to our civil coexistence:

Today too, outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the "barbarian," from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation. (no. 27)

In this age of ever new walls, the external world tends to disappear, and individuals are depersonalized and otherized, reduced simply to "them" (no. 27). What remains is "only 'my' world," in which we find ourselves enclosed within the multiple walls we build "in the hearts"

⁴⁹ The term "walls" is used fourteen times in the encyclical, including eight times in no. 27 alone, which is therefore crucial to understanding the concept of the "culture of walls." The term "barriers" is used three times by Pope Francis and refers to cultural and historical divisions. The term "border(s)" is used ten times, including five section titles (in the Introduction and chapters I, II, III, and IV) that group several paragraphs together. It indicates all those barriers that constitute obstacles to the call to universal brotherhood, such as cultural and religious differences, and borders between countries.

and “on the land,” isolated from the encounter with other cultures and other people (no. 27).

POPULAR VERSUS POPULIST

In this world of “walls,” Francis considers populism as a political translation of this exclusionary dynamic, which originates from—while also contributing to—this closed world.⁵⁰ Yet he cautions against the potential pitfalls of employing populism as an “interpretative key of social reality” (no. 157). First, although the term is widely used in society, its widespread use risks leading to an inflation of the word, making it a “source of polarization” (no. 156), as it can then be used to classify people and groups in a binary way—“populist or not-populist”—in order to exalt or discredit them. In this sense, the late pope cautions readers to not adopt the Manichean dynamic of the populist worldview. Second, this misuse of the term populism ignores and even distorts the “legitimate meaning of the word ‘people,’” which ultimately threatens the very existence of the word democracy as “government by the people” (no. 157). On the contrary, Francis argues that the notion of people, which should not be confused with demagoguery, is pivotal to understanding social reality. It allows to shed light on the “megatrends and communitarian aspirations,” as well as the “shared goals” that characterize life in society:

If we wish to maintain that society is more than a mere aggregate of individuals, the term “people” proves necessary. There are social phenomena that create majorities, as well as megatrends and communitarian aspirations. Men and women are capable of coming up with shared goals that transcend their differences and can thus engage in a common endeavour. Then too, it is extremely difficult to carry out a long-term project unless it becomes a collective aspiration. All these factors lie behind our use of the words “people” and “popular.” (no. 157)

According to Francis, while “logical categories” are useful for explaining what a people is, only “mythic” categories can capture the sense of belonging to a people, referring to a shared identity that stems from social and cultural ties that are built over time through “a slow, difficult process . . . of advancing towards a common project” (no.

⁵⁰ Pope Francis also discusses the role of economic neoliberalism and political liberalism as “interconnected political forces that lead to different forms of isolation and fragmentation,” thus contributing to the development of closed societies. See also Anna Rowlands, “*Fratelli Tutti*: A New Political Imagination,” in *Fratelli Tutti: A Global Commentary*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh et al. (James Clarke & Co, 2024), 193.

158). At the same time, a people is not only a “mythic” category, but also an “open-ended” one, leading to ever new syntheses “through its ability to welcome differences” and openness to “being mobilized, challenged, broadened and enriched by others” (no. 160). Populist groups, by contrast, distort this notion by interpreting it in a closed and exclusionary way. Francis’s dynamic vision of the people reflects the paradigm of the “polar tension,” seeking unity without denying its own identity or erasing differences. On the contrary, this vision believes that “oppositions are helpful” because life is structured in an oppositional way.⁵¹

Following the analysis of populism, the encyclical shifts its focus to populist leadership, thereby making an interesting and innovative distinction between “popular” and “populist” leaders (no. 159).⁵² While critical of populism, Pope Francis does not treat these categories as rigid or monolithic; instead, he acknowledges that a popular leader can “degenerate” into a populist and vice versa. Francis’s analysis is purely descriptive and rather unsystematic. However, more thorough examination of the paragraphs 159–161 unveils key characteristics of the two types of leadership, which are outlined in the table below. These characteristics can be distinguished based on three criteria: attitude and intrinsic motivation; leadership style and method; and envisioned aim or purpose.

First, popular leaders are marked by an attitude and motivation of *service* to the people and *detachment* from positions of power. In paragraph 159, we read how the service provided by popular leaders in their efforts “to unite and lead” the people is directed towards an “enduring vision of transformation and growth . . . in the pursuit of the common good.” In contrast, populist leaders are driven by the logic of *power* and seem to pursue *self-interest*, as their political actions are oriented toward “their own personal advantage or continuing grip on power” (no. 159). They might even “exploit” the culture of a people to that end. Second, popular leaders’ leadership style is characterized by the ability *to discern* as they interpret “the feelings and cultural dynamics of a people, and significant trends in society” (no. 159). They seek to implement long-term *projects* inspired by the aforementioned “transformation and growth that would also include

⁵¹ Antonio Spadaro, “Le orme di un pastore: Una conversazione con Papa Francesco,” in *Nei tuoi occhi è la mia parola: Omelie e discorsi di Buenos Aires 1999–2013*, ed. Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Rizzoli, 2016), cited in Massimo Borghesi, *Jorge Mario Bergoglio: Una biografia intellettuale* (Jaca Book, 2017), 121 (our translation).

⁵² We owe our inspiration to develop this analysis of the distinction between popular and populist leader to Mathias Nebel, who refers to it in his article “The Theology of the People, Pope Francis, and Populism: A Critical Latin American Perspective,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 1 (2023): 27–50, doi.org/10.5840/jcathso c20232013.

making room for others” (no. 159), while populist leaders are primarily driven by a “concern for short-term advantage” aimed at electoral gains (no. 161). Their *demagogic approach* seeks to secure consensus by instrumentalizing “politically a people’s culture” and fomenting “the basest and most selfish inclinations of certain sectors of the population” (no. 159). Moreover, and linked to this, the two types of leadership have an opposing view on the agency of the people. As they seek short-term advantages and electoral gain, populist leaders might focus on meeting the immediate needs of the people, e.g., through welfare projects and financial assistance, as to gain electoral support and votes (no. 161). However, while such measures might be necessary to meet urgent needs, “the broader objective” should be to develop sustainable, long-term solutions and “to structure society in such a way that everyone has a chance to contribute his or her own talents and efforts” (no. 162). In sum, populist leaders risk reducing the people to recipients of aid and help who need to be saved by the grace of the leader and welfare support. Popular leaders, on the other hand, advocate a political agenda that aims to enhance the agency of the people, through the processes of liberation and education, fostering “greater self-expression and participation in society” (no. 187). Third, the aim and purpose of a popular leader is to promote the common good, contributing to “an open world that makes room for everyone” (no. 155), while populist leaders will act for their own personal advantage (no. 159) or the interest of the community they represent—thus reducing the common good to the good of a particular community or nation. Moreover, populist leaders might defend and implement a nationalist protectionism, whereas genuine leadership would reinvest in multilateral agreements that produce the global common good (no. 174).⁵³

⁵³ Cf. Toussaint Kafarhire Murhala, “Reinventing Political Arrangements: A New Starting Point,” in *Fratelli Tutti: A Global Commentary*, 166.

	Popular leader	Populist leader
Attitude and motivation	• Service • Detachment (“making room for others”)	• Logic of power • Personal and political “gain”
Leadership style and political method	• Ethical leadership (uniting and leading) • Giving rise to a transformative process of personal and communal growth • Discernment (of “the feelings and cultural dynamics of a people, and significant trends in society”) • Long-term planning • Promoting the people’s agency	• Instrumentalizing a people’s culture • Ideological opportunism: Demagoguery (seeking popularity) • Appealing to the basest and most selfish inclinations • Concern for short-term advantage • Considering the people as passive recipients of aid
Purpose	• Growth and transformation of a people • Common good	• Sustaining power • Personal self-interest or interpreting ‘common good’ as good of particular community/nation

EXCURSUS: WAS FRANCIS A POPULIST?

During his papacy, critics of Pope Francis sought to dismiss him by labelling him as a “populist.”⁵⁴ This criticism was grounded, on the one hand, in the alleged influence of Peronism on his social and political thinking and, on the other hand, in the hermeneutic role that *el pueblo* plays in shaping his theological and pastoral vision. Like populists, he placed “the people” at the center of his political analysis, seeing them as being oppressed and excluded by the elite. From a theological and pastoral perspective, the emphasis on popular religiosity as “a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 126), led those critics to question who is included (and excluded) in *el pueblo*. To what extent does this view foster a Manichean vision of the church—one that is difficult to reconcile with the notion of the “People of God” as formulated in *Lumen Gentium*?⁵⁵ Nevertheless, to suggest that Francis’s commitment to the disadvantaged and to theology of the people warrants the label “populist” is a misguided interpretation. Hence, the question: how might we assess this accusation in light of the distinction that he develops in *Fratelli Tutti*?⁵⁶

⁵⁴ See Samuel Gregg, “Understanding Pope Francis: Argentina, Economic Failure, and the *Teología del Pueblo*,” *The Independent Review* 21, no. 3 (2017): 367–368; Loris Zanatta, “Sul populismo di Bergoglio: Storia, non teologia,” *Il Mulino: Rivista di cultura e di politica*, June 10, 2016, rivistailmulino.it/a/sul-populismo-di-bergoglio-storia-non-teologia (our translation); See also Loris Zanatta, *Il populismo gesuita: Perón, Fidel, Bergoglio* (Laterza, 2020); Loris Zanatta, *Bergoglio: Una biografia politica* (Laterza, 2025). According to the historian Daniele Menozzi, accusations of populism have been echoed by those traditionalist and elitist sectors within the Catholic world that utilize “any form of criticism of the Pope” to denounce what they perceive as Francis’s alleged progressivism and to obstruct his measures of pastoral renewal. Daniele Menozzi, “Populismo e popolo in Francesco,” *Humanitas: rivista bimestrale di cultura* 77, no. 4 (2022): 518 (our translation); See also Massimo Faggioli, “Populismo o elitismo nella Chiesa,” *Il Mulino: Rivista di cultura e di politica*, March 30, 2016, rivistailmulino.it/a/populismo-o-elitismo-nella-chiesa.

⁵⁵ Mathias Nebel, “The Theology of the People, Pope Francis, and Populism,” 27–50. From a Latin American perspective, theologian Matthias Nebel argues that Francis is not “a populist in disguise” (41), but he nonetheless warns how Francis’s conceptualization of the people as a sign of “God’s salvific presence to the world” has the potential to exacerbate societal polarization between the people and the elite, or between rich and poor (38). By potentially “adding a religious legitimacy to the resentment of the Latin American population,” this conceptualization could become susceptible to populist exploitation (49).

⁵⁶ In his article “The Populist Pope?,” theologian William McCormick also addresses the question whether Francis could or should be considered a populist. Differently than his article, we answer the question starting from Francis’s distinction between popular and populist as developed in *Fratelli Tutti*, while integrating some of McCormick’s observations. See William McCormick, “The Populist Pope? Politics, Religion, and Pope Francis,” *Politics and Religion*, no. 14 (2021): 159–181, doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000176.

Firstly, Pope Francis was the example of “a popular and charismatic leader who does not embrace populism, but rather transcends it,” cultivating through concrete gestures “an image of simplicity and humility.”⁵⁷ Indeed, like a popular but not a populist leader, Pope Francis’s pontificate was signified by an attitude of service and detachment from power. He had chosen to lead not only through words but also through *actions*, prioritizing “the least” in our society—the marginalized, the discarded, and the voiceless. A striking example is his decision to visit the island of Lampedusa for his first official papal journey, where he denounced the “globalization of indifference,” a phrase that has since become central to his lexicon.⁵⁸ Exactly at this place, he made his first reference to the principle of fraternity, later fully developed in *Fratelli Tutti*. Over the years, Pope Francis has made the “peripheries” a focus of his travels, visiting places and people often overlooked by politics and the media.

Secondly, looking at his leadership style and method, Pope Francis has, since the beginning of his pontificate, called the Church to a long-term process of discernment, urging it to listen attentively to the “signs of the times” to incarnate its mission in today’s world. This reflects one of his key principles for the common good in *Evangelii Gaudium*: prioritizing time over space, believing that initiating processes of change is more important than holding positions of power (nos. 222–223). This entails engaging in meaningful actions capable of “generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness” (no. 224). This approach contrasts with the tendency of populist leaders to seek short-term advantages. As Francis stated, “This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results” (no. 223). This principle is evident in the ongoing synodal process, which has engaged the entire Catholic Church in rediscovering synodality as its constitutive dimension. Synodality is considered as a journey of conversion and discernment at all levels of ecclesial life towards a more participatory and missionary Church, “so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.”⁵⁹ However, Francis has also cautioned that “synodality without communion can become ecclesiastical populism,” thereby emphasizing that synodality is not merely a matter of reorganizing church structures or a “more or

⁵⁷ McCormick, “The Populist Pope?,” 174.

⁵⁸ Francis, “Homily: Visit to Lampedusa,” July 8, 2013, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

⁵⁹ General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document,” October 26, 2024, synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

less democratic method” of being Church, but rather a path of ecclesial communion “founded on Trinitarian communion” that seeks to open minds and hearts to the will of the Holy Spirit in order to address today’s social and pastoral challenges.⁶⁰ Does this synodality also have the capacity to illuminate the path that the Church must take as it attempts to address the division populism creates in our societies? Indeed, it does, as is demonstrated by James F. Keenan’s interpretation of synodality as a “Spirit-led discourse” and as a method of inclusion that addresses the needs of those experiencing alienation and marginalization.⁶¹ Such a synodal process has the potential to restore “social trust,” defined as the degree of trust people have both in their fellow citizens and in institutions, which has been severely tested by the rise of populism in many countries.⁶² In this sense, synodality can be regarded as an antidote to the dynamics of exclusion characteristic of populism, both within society and within the Church. As a path of communion, synodality seeks to reconcile populist masses and governing elites, based on “mutual recognition and human vulnerability,” guided by a logic of “servant leadership” rather than the pursuit of power.⁶³ It thereby aims to overcome the asymmetries and paralyzing distance between rulers and the ruled, as well as among political actors in general, moving beyond social hierarchies and mutual distrust towards a shared (and “Spirit-led”) vision of the common good.

Third, with regard to aim and purpose, Francis refuted the populist (and elitist) exclusivist “either/or” approach and Manichean view of society, which results in interpreting the “common good” as a good of a particular community or nation.⁶⁴ His “both/and” approach conveyed a logic of inclusion and reconciliation between the different components of society, with a focus on the (global) common good and social peace. This perspective is consistent with Francis’s vision of both society and the church as a *polyhedron*, in which differences are not erased but rather “coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215).

In sum, it is only within the confines of a reductionist and one-sided focus on the theology of the people that one could possibly label

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, “Videomessaggio del Santo Padre Francesco in occasione della plenaria della Pontificia Commissione per l’America Latina,” May 27, 2022, [vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220526-videomessaggio-penaria-pcal.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220526-videomessaggio-penaria-pcal.html) (our translation).

⁶¹ James F. Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust: From Populism to Synodality,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (2023): 110–133, doi:10.1177/00405639221150757.

⁶² Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 110–111.

⁶³ Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 126, 131.

⁶⁴ See also McCormick, “The Populist Pope?,” 171.

Francis as a populist in disguise. However, such a claim is rendered implausible when taking his acute awareness of “the perversions of populism” into account.⁶⁵ Rather, we can consider him as a popular leader in his own terms.

FRANCIS’S RESPONSE TO POPULISM: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LOVE

Confronted with the exclusivist tendencies of right-wing populism and the risk that religions may be instrumentalized in the process, what is the alternative? The central tenet of the “better kind of politics” outlined in *Fratelli Tutti* is “social and political charity.” This approach can be considered a third way beyond populism and liberalism, which fail to promote “an open world that makes room for everyone, including the most vulnerable, and shows respect for different cultures” (no. 155). Despite widespread disaffection with politics among large sections of the population, Pope Francis argues that “a sound political life” is necessary for the cultivation of social peace (no. 176). This means recognizing the primacy of politics over economics and repositioning politics at the center of public life, in order to respond to today’s many challenges.

This political charity or love pursues the objective of overcoming individualism in order to effectively seek the common good (no. 182). It is grounded in a relational anthropology that considers human beings as capable of transcending mere self-interest for the sake of the community and each individual within it. In line with the anthropological vision developed in Catholic social thought over the last decades, Pope Francis reiterated that between the person and the people there is a link of reciprocity. He asserts that individuals become “fully a person” when they belong to a people, and at the same time there is no true people without a deep respect for each person (no. 182).

This political love facilitates progress towards a “civilization of love” and can contribute to “building a new world,” imagining new ways of development to address the problems of today’s world. However, it should not be confused with sentimentalism (no. 183). On the contrary, it is marked by a “commitment to the truth,” in a constructive and proactive engagement with social reality, with the objective of attaining a “human development of universal range” (no. 184).

In describing the activity of political love, and drawing inspirations from Thomas Aquinas, Francis makes a distinction between “elicited” love, that is, charity directed to persons and peoples, and “commanded”

⁶⁵ Nebel, “The Theology of the People,” 41–42.

love, that is, those acts of charity that lead to the creation of more just institutions and effective regulations (no. 186). It follows that it “is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering” (no. 186). The second, more structural, form of charity constitutes the typical dimension of political love.

Fratelli Tutti highlights two fundamental dimensions of political love. First, it is always “a preferential love” for the poor and vulnerable (no. 187). It recognizes their immense dignity and culture, and ensures that everyone becomes the architect of her or his own destiny (no. 187). This means concretely taking care of people’s needs and fighting anything which threatens their rights (no. 188). Second, political love is characterized by an “openness to everyone,” implying: (1) a willingness to make “sacrifices” in order to facilitate encounter; (2) the seeking of a convergence of views; (3) listening to the other points of view; (4) the inclusion of different perspectives; and (5) having patience and perseverance in the commitment to the common good (no. 190). The aim is to facilitate an encounter with different perspectives, following the example of the polyhedron in which everyone finds a place and makes a unique contribution (no. 190). This means renouncing the logic of division and a closed identity to embrace a culture of coexistence and peace in diversity. As Francis states in paragraph 191,

Even as forms of fanaticism, closedmindedness, and social and cultural fragmentation proliferate in present-day society, a good politician will take the first step and insist that different voices be heard. Disagreements may well give rise to conflicts, but uniformity proves stifling and leads to cultural decay. May we not be content with being enclosed in one fragment of reality.

The commitment to fraternity and social friendship is not a mere utopia, but rather “a noble exercise of charity,” namely of “political charity” (no. 180). As Grégoire Catta states, this love is not only expressed in “interpersonal relationships” but also extends to “social relationships, institutions, and structures that shape societies.”⁶⁶ Theologian François Euvé and economist and theologian Elena Lasida affirm that fraternity “must become *political*” (“doit se faire *politique*”) by giving rise to a more fraternal society.⁶⁷ Anthropologist and priest

⁶⁶ Grégoire Catta, “*Fratelli tutti*: proposition de lecture théologique d’une encyclique sociale,” *Revue d’éthique et de théologie morale* 2, no. 310 (2021): 105, doi.org/10.3917/retm.313.0103 (our translation).

⁶⁷ François Euvé and Elena Lasida, “*Fratelli tutti*,” *Études* 12 (2020): 74, doi.org/10.3917/etu.4277.0069 (our translation).

Albert Alejo has captured this dynamic and mutual relationship between love (or fraternity) and politics in *Fratelli Tutti*: “While the encyclical affirms the essential and constitutive role of politics in effecting love, it also asserts that the *practice* of politics must be imbued with the spirit of social fraternity and utter respect for persons.”⁶⁸

Francis’s political vision has not been without criticism. The notion of social and political charity is so far removed from *realpolitik* that it can appear utopian and naïve. However, this call for fraternity and social friendship must be understood within a broader perspective. Francis was not merely describing reality, but he was urging us to transform it by initiating processes of fraternity for the benefit of those most in need. His goal is to stir consciences, calling on politicians to rediscover the fundamental purpose of their vocation: the promotion of fraternity and the pursuit of the common good.

Yet, the question remains as to how Francis’s political vision can be put into practice. While his call for *better politics* should be understood as an appeal to personal responsibility rooted in the Gospel—an invitation to view political engagement as the highest form of service, and therefore of love—rather than as a concrete instruction manual, it remains unclear how universal neighborly love can be lived out in political contexts, where competing priorities and pragmatic considerations shape the agenda. What does it truly mean to engage in dialogue in politics? How does one respond to those who are unwilling to engage in dialogue? How can the call to welcome migrants at borders be reconciled with the growing affirmation of national and sub-national political identities? Ultimately, does the vision proposed by Francis constitute a utopian ideal? The synodal path suggests a possible way forward. As articulated in the Synod’s concluding document, when embodied with humility and a spirit of communion, synodality offers a methodology to confront the challenges posed by a world afflicted by armed conflicts, pervasive disenchantment with democratic institutions, escalating autocratic and dictatorial inclinations, and the emergence of populist movements.⁶⁹ In such contexts, “The temptation can be to resolve conflicts by force rather than by dialogue” (no. 47). In contrast, true synodality “enable[s] Christians to be a critical and prophetic voice over against the prevailing culture,” thereby contributing to the search for responses to the numerous challenges our societies are confronted with in the pursuit of the common good (no. 47). This entails bearing

⁶⁸ Albert E. Alejo, “Political Love: Beyond the Good Samaritan Charity,” in *Fratelli Tutti: A Global Commentary*, 173; emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document.”

the weight of broken relationships, listening to the poor and to those who feel excluded and marginalized, and striving to move beyond polarization and antagonism both inside and outside the Church. Synodality, therefore, is a path of communion that can guide Christians—together with the rest of humanity—toward responses that uphold the dignity of every human being and foster the realization of the common good. These views present a compelling challenge to theologians, as they must endeavor to transform these perspectives into practice: what form would a dialogue grounded in synodality take in the context of polarization and populism?

CONCLUSION

The contemporary world is characterized by a pervasive “culture of walls,” and the rising nationalist-populism is no exception to this dynamic. Fear is both the *cause* of walls, since they are built in self-defense, and their *effect*, since in a fortified society, suspicion and fear of outsiders will tend to grow, leading to the creation of new walls to seek protection from what frightens us. This is exactly what we see happening with the rise of right-wing populism, which can be considered a political expression of this “culture of walls.”

As an alternative, Francis calls for a new culture, the “culture of encounter” centered on the idea of fraternity, which implies abandoning the friend/enemy logic to welcome the other’s point of view, recognizing that it may offer meaningful insights. To this end, a “better kind of politics” at the service of the common good is all the more necessary as an answer, on the one hand, to the closed identity promoted by populists and, on the other, to individualistic liberal visions. Such a commitment to fraternity, manifesting not only in individual relationships but also in social, economic and political domains, is an expression of political love, which Pope Francis defined as the broadest field of charity. Far from being sterile sentimentalism, love is then at the heart of social life and is an alternative to the “culture of walls.” It replaces mistrust of those who are different, whoever they may be, with a commitment to a way of life that tends to form a multi-faceted polyhedron. It gives rise to a new social pact and shows the image of a society in which “differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 215).

With this encyclical, Francis invites Christians—and Catholics in particular—in these times of crisis not to yield to fear or to retreat behind protective walls. The construction of walls is not an alien concept to Christians, including Catholics (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 39), yet this is not the authentically Christian response. Catholics are called to exemplify fraternity, rather than fear. In doing so, religions, Palaver

argues, “are an important counterweight against populism as soon as the spirit of dynamic religion governs the daily life of their communities.”⁷⁰

According to Francis, Catholics are called upon to embrace political love and to set it in motion in the world. This requires the courage to confront the challenges of the present with a sense of responsibility, without averting one’s gaze from the prevailing issues, yet without succumbing to the allure of facile solutions, such as the myth of the redemptive leader or the retreat into a partial and closed “us.” Rather, it requires transcending blind particularisms through a collective commitment to achieve the common good, without ceasing to engage in dialogue—even in the midst of the most heated conflicts. In summary, this signifies the cultivation of a politics of hope, which is the antithesis of the politics of fear that has been denounced by Francis.

According to James F. Keenan, religious leaders (along with “other political, cultural, and social leaders”) who support populist discourse out of fear of losing their power—by developing a “parasitic relationship to the populist leader”—compromise the identity of their institution and run the risk of betraying the mission to which they are called in their ministry.⁷¹ At the same time, Keenan warns theologians against limiting themselves to merely denouncing the divisive tendencies of populism, particularly its tendency to seek scapegoats, without recognizing the grievances of the masses or understanding the underlying causes of their discontent. In this sense, he underscores the need for theological reflection in order to “separate the toxicity of populism from the lament and concern of some of the masses.”⁷² This is exactly what *Fratelli Tutti* attempts to do: recognizing the anxiety and lament of the people, and how these feelings might lead them to use violence in situations of injustice. However, it does not give in to hate, fear, and resentment as a last resort. Francis’s plea, and legacy, for a dynamic rather than a static version of Christianity goes to the heart of our Christian faith—especially today when Christians face an identity crisis and must choose which side they are on. Faced with the cries of a wounded and divided world, the answer may yet be still as simple—and as challenging—as it was eighty years ago: “How could we abandon them?” **M**

⁷⁰ Palaver, “Fraternity Versus Parochialism,” 7.

⁷¹ Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 122.

⁷² Keenan, “Restoring Social Trust,” 125.

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