

# Responding to populism with Catholic Social Teaching

## Civic imagination and practical wisdom



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We have all been overwhelmed over the last months by news stories about rising populism. Yet Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's valuable insight reminds us that 'one of the most used and abused terms inside and outside of academia is undoubtedly populism. At times it seems that almost every politician, at least those we do not like, is a populist.'<sup>1</sup>

This seems to ring true! To be sure, the term is often used to discuss right wing politics, including politicians touting xenophobic rhetoric. Yet the surprise UK electoral swing towards the Labour party has also been called populist.<sup>2</sup> It is a very broad political spectrum that contains Donald Trump, Front Nationale, Poland's Law and Justice Party and Jeremy Corbyn. So to say that a political movement is populist actually tells us very little about its politics.

Instead, what ultimately characterises populist movements is their emphasis on being from or with the populace – 'the people' – in opposition to perceived unjust power. Margaret Canovan has drawn out the breadth of such an antagonistic stance particularly well: 'populism challenges not only established power-holders but also elite values. Populist animus is directed not just at the political and economic establishments but also at opinion-formers in the academy and the media.'<sup>3</sup>

This helps us to acknowledge that there are populist currents within mainstream political parties within the UK,<sup>4</sup> since there is a clear echo here of the then Justice Secretary Michael Gove's declaration during the Brexit campaign that

'people have had enough of experts'.<sup>5</sup> This reveals more: the Welsh Marxist, Raymond Williams, charted a shift in the use of the word 'popular' in his valuable Keywords project, mapping an increasing sense of 'simplification' or even the trivial. An 'earlier sense [of the word] has not died,' he argues. 'Popular culture was not identified by the people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work ... and work deliberately setting out to win favour', concluding that 'Populism embodies all these variations.'<sup>6</sup>

These historical connotations subvert the idea of populism as being truly of the people. Williams presents a sense of a populist movement as in some way artificial – responding rather than arising from that group, and having more to do with self-interest than rigorous reasoning. All of this re-emphasises the oppositional character of populism and adds an element of insincerity, casting doubt on whether 'the people' are really included at all.

This would all remain an interesting semantic inquiry if not for the reality of the challenge facing liberal democracies in our current age. Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher,<sup>7</sup> named this challenge sharply in an interview late in his life: 'I think that one could now define democracy, among others, by the manner of equitable treatment of minorities, and therefore, by the recognition of values belonging to another culture residing among us.'<sup>8</sup>

This is what sharpens our consideration of populism today into a sincere concern for the future of democratic political life: we are in a plural context, summoned to care for the minority, and the

## NOTES

1. C Mudge, CR Kaltwasser, 'Populism and (liberal) democracy: a framework for analysis', their own edited collection *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2. E.g., John Gray's analysis in June this year: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/06/labours-populism-middle-classes>

3. M Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies* 47.1 (1999), p. 3.

4. Also recently argued by M Freeden, 'After the Brexit Referendum: Revisiting populism as an ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22.1 (2017), pp. 1–11.

5. M Gove, 'Interview with Faisal Islam', Sky News, 3rd June 2016. Full interview from Sky News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8D8AoC-5i8> (accessed 11th July 2017).

6. R Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, revised edition), 'Popular', p. 237.

vulnerable. Yet, our political divisions, even when not explicitly xenophobic, are increasingly arranged around 'us versus them' distinctions. This limits even the opportunities for dialogue, let alone political action. Populism is a threat to conversation itself.

## Theological concerns

The fear that democratic institutions and practices might give way beneath a populist onslaught also has its historical forebears in theological sources. Thomas Aquinas, that great taproot of Catholic social thought, had precisely such an unbalancing in mind in his assessment of democracy as a model of government. He argues: 'if wrongful government is exercised by the many, this is named 'democracy', that is, 'rule by the people'; and this comes about when the common people oppress the rich by force of numbers. In this way the whole people will be like a single tyrant.'<sup>9</sup>

Aquinas is writing this reflection on the behaviour of governments by exploring the flaws in all models, including the monarch as the worst tyrant of all. Writing in the thirteenth century and at the request of the King of Cyprus, it is perhaps unsurprising that his solution is still a monarchical one. Yet, Aquinas's related work in *Summa Theologiae* underlines the need for accountability, and even legitimate resistance.

We can see then, that despite the very different kinds of threats to social order, the fear of decisions arising from mere force rather than reasoned political consensus is as live now as then. Aquinas's reasoning links us back to Ricoeur's concern for the minority: 'The good and wellbeing of a community united in fellowship lies in the preservation of its unity. This is called peace, and when it is removed and the community is divided against itself, social life loses its advantage and instead becomes a burden.'<sup>10</sup>

Populist movements, with their us/them mentality, strike at the heart of what Aquinas understands to be the very wellbeing of a community: its peaceful unity. Such unity is further fractured by Williams' insight regarding hidden divisions between self-interested leaders and their supporters. All of this disrupts the possibility of political discourse by introducing stark oppositions as division, and even damages our quality of life together.

Aquinas offers us a foreshadowing of some of the ways in which Catholic Social Teaching (CST) might help us respond to the reality of populist divisions. The principles of CST continue to emphasise the unity of the whole human community and the goodness of politics as a tool to nourish and order that unity.

## Unity

We can see that today's Catholic social thinking is profoundly rooted in Aquinas's image of peaceful unity, in the emphasis that successive texts have given to the human whole: 'In an increasingly

globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the earthly city in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided city of God' (*Caritas in Veritate*, §7).

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This is from Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical responding to the financial crisis.<sup>11</sup> In it unity is rendered both as a description of the whole of humanity as the subject of political thought, and as an imperative, that guides the shape of social and political action toward a shared peace. The end of division is cast here as eschatological, happening beyond our world, but still reveals a teleological purpose for human political life: to attempt such peace. As the most recent encyclical, *Laudato Si* from Pope Francis in 2014, insists, 'decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build' (§107). Aquinas consistently presented politics as a natural part of human endeavour, managing our relationships to each other as a whole rather than in terms of competing self-interest.

This medieval emphasis on relationship is kept explicit throughout the work of CST. One powerful example can be found in the language of John Paul II's 1987 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: 'the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane. Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny' (§26).

John Paul II is here arguing for a shift from the reality of our global situation, to recasting it in moral terms: 'When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity' (§38). The description of our shared situation becomes a summons to 'recognize one another as persons' (§39) and so to act together.

*Laudato Si* is a crucial addition to the corpus of CST, precisely because the assessment it offers of global commitment to solidarity is so different from that of 1987. 'Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded' (§25). Rather than framing solidarity only as an attitude, *Laudato Si* recalls other texts from the tradition that underline concrete recognition of responsibility and duty. For example, Paul VI argued in 1967 that 'We are the heirs of earlier generations, and we reap

benefits from the efforts of our contemporaries; we are under obligation to all [people] ... the reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations' (*Populorum Progressio*, §17). Thus solidarity requires us to articulate (and fulfill!) our duty to each other, continuing to underline unity as an ethical horizon and as an active task for today.

However, there are dangers here. The emphasis on togetherness as unity could easily tip us into the same kind of purity politics that steers populist thinking. Yet crucially, CST principles also

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deliberately make room for differentiation. They demand of us a more complex interplay between unity and plurality than populist trends permit.

### Differentiation

In some ways the writers of the formal teaching documents of the Catholic Church are alive to the danger of proposing one true solution. The texts are cautious about advocating for any one form of government intervention, or any kind of party politics. It is the interplay with other principles of CST that offers further tools of reasoning and analysis that require differentiation within the shared project of political life.

First, there is the subtlety offered by the principle of the common good: 'that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment' (*Gaudium et Spes*, §26). This text from 1965, one of the Constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, continually places the human person at the heart of the collective task. Rather than a utilitarian good, which can exclude and erase the interests of vulnerable persons and groups, this principle of common good describes 'the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being'.<sup>12</sup> Thus what is mutual and common must respect the particular, through to the 'unrepeatable' individual (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, §13).

Secondly, this is broken open into real diversity by the further principle of subsidiarity. This principle calls us to be attentive to the place where a political action can effectively and respectfully respond to any given situation: 'it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also ... to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do' (Pius XI, *Quadregesimo Anno*, §79).

The emphasis in this example is on finding the most local way of acting, which is frequently how subsidiarity is read.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the principle also requires us to acknowledge that solutions will come from different 'levels' and from different spheres. This does not invoke a particular model of government intervention, nor party politics, but rather what *Laudato Si* describes as 'the development of a variety of intermediate groups' (§157) – unions, community, charity and church activities, civic activism, and more. There is self-understanding to be developed in realising that no single human practice or institution has a whole answer yet and our daily lives hold opportunities for real participation.

This more nuanced understanding of subsidiarity broadens the discussion to the wider field of civic life, rather than pure party politics. It heralds a richly plural set of expectations about how that life might be worked out together, in solidarity. In this way CST tries to offer not answers but tools for us to take up within an enriched understanding of civic life.

### Civic imagination and practical wisdom

So on one hand we have a task of imagination, to think our society anew, in contrast with fearful populist divisions. Where populism separates to oppose, CST recalls our wholeness and rejects any fracturing; where populism fears difference, CST sees interdependence and names a summons to solidarity; where populism implicitly emphasises self-interest, CST explicitly recognises a common good and advocates for diverse participation at all levels in a mutual civic society. In a sense CST is trying to speak about 'the people' – us – far more than populism achieves.

Yet this reimagining of ourselves together will still leave unity as the horizon we are pursuing. We live amongst plural values. We are not going to agree about our vision of shared life and this prompts another task: to mediate between unity and difference. I call this a task of practical wisdom precisely because it requires us to negotiate between visions and real duties and practices. This means compromise to ensure action, but also reasoned debate to resist what will harm others, including critiquing our own institutions: 'we are all really responsible for all' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §38).

Taken together, civic imagination and practical wisdom help us to think and practice our own responsibility within a network of institutional responsibilities and other daily encounters and practices that shape our common good. Above all, populism threatens to render us inert: trapped in our own fear. Civic imagination cracks that open by recalling the possibility of right relationships and the practical wisdom of solidarity and subsidiarity give us the tools to start creating them.

## NOTES

7. French President Emmanuel Macron, was actually Ricoeur's research assistant and editor for his last great systematic work, *Memory History, Forgetting*. This is well explored in Joe Humphrey's article: <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/paul-ricoeur-the-philosopher-behind-emmanuel-macron-1.3094792>

8. P Ricoeur, S Antohi, 'Memory, History, Forgiveness' in *Janus Head* 8.1 (2005), p. 22.

9. Thomas Aquinas, 'De Regimine principum', RW Dyson, *Thomas Aquinas: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Book I, Chapter II, p. 9.

10. Thomas Aquinas, 'De Regimine principum', Book I, Chapter III, pp.10–11.

11. All the papal documents quoted can be found by a search of the Vatican website: <http://w2.vatican.va>

12. D Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 81.

13. Including its use in foundational documents of the European Union, for example.