

Ziad Fahed¹

HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH VIEWS THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY?

Jesus, the Son of Man, fought against the temptation of a political messianism. He is the one who came *"to serve, and to give his life"*.² While he did not oppose directly the authorities of his time, Jesus refuses the oppressive and despotic power wielded by the rulers of the nations. He affirmed in his pronouncement on the paying of taxes to Caesar³ that we must give to God what is God's, implicitly condemning every attempt at making temporal power divine or absolute.

The Catholic Church has a long history of close relations with the state and government in power. This was the case in different times and different locations in the world. Through this kind of relationship and support, the Church extended its power and influence and became more powerful. The Compendium of the social Doctrine of the Church (2005) describes the political community as a place where the human person is the foundation; and so everything must be directed to serve and help the human person. The gospel of Mark added *"the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"*.⁴ Through this verse Jesus re-placed man in the center of Creation. Everything, particularly the political community, must be directed to serve man who has been created *"in the image of God"*;⁵ the political community is included because it is in charge of the common good of all the members of the same society. In this paper, we will present the foundations and purpose of the political community as seen by the Catholic Church.

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² Mk 10, 45; Mt 20:24-28; Lk 22: 24-27.

³ Mk 12: 13-17; Mt 22: 15-22; Lk 20:20-26.

⁴ Marc 2/27.

⁵ Genesis 1.

1) *The dignity of the human person*

Being responsible for his own choices, the human person is endowed with a rational nature and is able to pursue projects that give meaning to his life at the individual and social levels. *"Only in relation to the Transcendent and to others does the human person reach the total and complete fulfillment of himself". This means that for the human person, a naturally social and political being, "social life is not something added on"⁶ but is part of an essential and indelible dimension⁷.*

The Catholic Church confesses that the "political community originates in the nature of persons, whose conscience *reveals to them and enjoins them to obey*". The role of the political community is to be in charge of *"the full growth of each of its members, called to cooperate steadfastly for the attainment of the common good"*.⁸ The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, *"in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection."*⁹

1.1 *The human person has an indelible dignity*

As seen by the Catholic Church, human dignity considers that human beings possess intrinsic worthiness and deserve unconditional respect; therefore it transcends any social order as the basis for rights and is neither granted by society nor can it be legitimately violated by society. The human being is a person, not just an individual.¹⁰ In Psalm number 8, we can read the following verses: *"What is man, that you think of him? What is the son of man, that you care for him? For you have made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honor. You make him ruler over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet"*.¹¹ In this way, human dignity is the conceptual basis for human rights. For the Catholic Church, the source of human dignity is rooted in the concept of man as *"image of God"*¹², and in Christ's redemption; and the destiny of man in his union with God. He is *"the only*

⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 25.

⁷ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, 384.

⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2212.

¹¹ Psalm 8, 4-7.

¹² Genesis 1 and 2.

creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake",¹³ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity. "Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead".¹⁴

Because there is a social or communal dimension to human dignity itself, persons in Catholic moral thought must be conceived not in overly-individualistic terms-, but as being inherently connected to the rest of society. At this level exactly, the political community must assume a role of being in charge, and of being the guardian offering the common good for all without discrimination. Among all the creatures, only man is "able to know and love his creator".¹⁵ Only a human being is able to take his life in hand and organize long-term projects.

1.2 The human person possesses the potential of building communities and realizing projects

The Catholic Church recognizes in Vatican II that man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. It is through individual members helping one another that the community succeeds in realizing its mission. Hence, the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person. In fact, the Catholic Church believes that God has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. This altruistic spirit must lead the community because every 'other' is created in the image of God, Who "from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth"¹⁶. All men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself; for this reason, love for God and neighbor is the first and greatest commandment¹⁷ as indicated in the Holy Scriptures. The Fathers of the second Vatican council stated that

¹³ GS 24, 3.

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 356-357.

¹⁵ GS12, 3.

¹⁶ Acts 17:26.

¹⁷ Rom. 13:9-10; cf. 1 John 4:20.

*“everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity”.*¹⁸

In fact, when Jesus prayed to the Father, *“that all may be one . . . as we are one,”*¹⁹ he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of human kind in truth and charity. And creation, by working for this unity, will be realizing its being in the image and likeness of God. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself focusing his minds on things above, not on earthly things.²⁰ *“Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another”* as pointed out by the Fathers of Vatican II.

2) Promoting the human rights and defending the common good

Considering that the human person was created in the image of God means that the purpose and objective of any political community is to defend and promote the *“inalienable human rights”*.²¹ While defending human dignity, the Catholic Church promotes the image of God as the Creator and as the origin of all human rights. Every person is offered inalienable human rights that should never be taken away, violated, nor transferred from one person to another. Inalienable rights are natural rights, meaning *not-granted* or conditional, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They form the most fundamental set of human rights.

2.1 Christ fully God and fully human

The mystery of the Incarnation²² is the deepest insight of the Christian faith: Christ was both fully God and fully man, and his life both fulfilled the divine commands, and was concretely lived in the midst of a specific ethos. The Fathers of the Council Vatican II profess that Christ *“walked the ways of a true Incarnation that He*

¹⁸ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

¹⁹ John 17:21-22.

²⁰ Colossian 3, 2.

²¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, 388.

²² The Incarnation is the understanding in Christianity that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. The word Incarnate derives from Latin (in=in, carnis=flesh) meaning “In the flesh.” The incarnation is a fundamental theological teaching of Christianity, based on its understanding of the New Testament. The incarnation represents the belief that Jesus, who is the non-created Second Person of the Trinity; took on a human body and nature and became both man and God.

might make men sharers in the nature of God".²³ The humanity of Jesus was given to him upon his birth and his divinity was eternally derived from his unique relationship of trust and obedience with God. The Christian doctrine professes that Christ was one person of two natures "for in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity".²⁴ Jesus, the son of God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness... he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death".²⁵

In the theology of the Incarnation as traditionally defined, the divine nature of the Son was united with the human nature in one divine Person. The Son of God has revealed to human beings that they are sons and daughters of God the Creator, the father of all human beings. By his incarnation, the "Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart"²⁶. This is why one may say that the way of Jesus is normative for those who want to claim to be his disciples. The people of God are called to follow his example in trust and obedience to God.

2.2 The political community is to serve the common good

The common good promotes a specific "good" that is shared by and beneficial to all (or most) members of a specific society. It is a utilitarian ideal, thus representing "the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals".

The concept of the common good is central in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition beginning with the foundational document, *Rerum Novarum*.²⁷ It is "chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained"²⁸. The rights and duties of any person contain "a concise summary of the principal moral and juridical requirements that must preside over the construction of the political community".²⁹ The purpose of the political community is to work for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. The common good is oriented to assist the different actors of a certain society to work for their own perfection. And the authority of the political community

²³ *Ad Gentes*, 3.

²⁴ Col. 2/9.

²⁵ *Philippians* 2, 4-6.

²⁶ *Gaudium Spes* 22.

²⁷ *Rerum Novarum* is a papal encyclical by Pope Leo XII, issued in 1891 to combat the excesses of both capitalism and communism. The Pope defended the right to private property while insisting on the role of the state to require a living wage.

²⁸ John Paul II, Message for the 1989 World Day of Peace, 11, AAS 81, 1989, 101.

²⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, 388.

is to “direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one's freedom and sense of responsibility”.³⁰

As a community is established to be in charge of the society, “the political community pursues the common good when it seeks to create a human environment that offers citizens the possibility of truly exercising their human rights and of fulfilling completely their corresponding duties”³¹. Any community must have solid foundations if it tends toward the promotion of the person and of the common good of its members.

3) Realizing and achieving the living together

The interaction of the members of the same society creates a social life where the different issues, joys and tragedies, concerns and challenges are shared by all with no distinction. The members of the same societies face the same realities and the same facts. Experience through centuries proves that the more those elements are shared and confronted with unity and solidarity among the society itself, the more they are easily solved. The social life is a place where solid relations and friendship arise; “Life in society takes on all its significance when it is based on civil friendship and on fraternity,”³² because the subject and the goal of all social institutions “is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life. Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny”.³³

3.1 The political community a genuine actualization of the principle of fraternity

When Jesus was asked the question “Who is my neighbor?” in the parable of the Good Samaritan,³⁴ he answered by inviting his interlocutor to go and act with mercy and compassion. Jesus goes beyond the question asked him and calls for a specific way of “neighborly life”.³⁵ The neighbor, or the “near one” as Thomas W. Walker (2008) describes him, is the one who treats those who are indeed in need of

³⁰ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

³¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, 389.

³² *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2005, 390.

³³ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 25.

³⁴ Luke 10, 25-37.

³⁵ Thomas W. Walter, “Who Is My Neighbor? An Invitation to Seed the World with Different Eyes”, *Global Neighbors*, 2008, p. 9.

care and compassion without being limited by any kind of obstacles. Thomas W. Walker³⁶ insisted that through this text the Gospel redefines and gives new imaginative possibilities to the category of “neighbor”; as the text assumes that boundaries enclose every single one by limited identities and definition of being far and near, Jesus redefines the concept of “neighbor” and challenges every single one by His invitation “Go and do likewise,” to be full of compassion and mercy – “go and love your neighbor as yourself”. Go! Abandon your perceptions and go beyond your boundaries.

The Catholic Church sees that Christ has willed the world as a place where being-together is achievable through the participation and the will of every single person. Society is the place where any one of its members is capable of contributing towards the creation of a more responsible environment. Society is the place where believers must be able to realize a community of relationship among its members. The will of God as taught by the Catholic Church is that all men “*should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood*”³⁷. For having been created in the image of God, Who “*from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth,*”³⁸ all men are called to the one and the same goal, namely God Himself. For this reason, love for God and neighbor is the first and greatest commandment. Indeed Catholic theology professes that love and faith in God are not possible without love and faith in human beings, starting by the “near one”, the accessible one, and the visible one, as a visible image of God the Father. Catholic theology puts the love of the member of a same group as a condition *sine qua non* for loving God as the Father of Creation.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan could serve as a wonderful model for the political community and for society at large. Kenneth E. Baiely,³⁹ commenting on this parable, notes that the bandits take money from the man, whereas the Samaritan spends money on the man; the bandits beat the man, whereas the Samaritan spends money on the man; the bandits beat the man, whereas the Samaritan binds his wounds; finally, the bandits leave him for dead and depart with no promise of return, whereas the Samaritan leaves him in the care of others, and he promises to come back so that he himself can check on him. What more can a political community do for its own success in being together away from any kind of discrimination? What can a political community achieve more than helping all those who are in need? What

³⁶ Thomas Walker, “Who Is My Neighbor? An Invitation to Seed the World with Different Eyes”, *Global neighbors*, 2008, p.14.

³⁷ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

³⁸ Acts 17:26.

³⁹ Kenneth E. Baiely, *Poet and Peasant*, Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1976, p. 73.

can a political community achieve more importantly than protecting and preventing any kind of crises and wars?

3.2 The civilization of love and political life are to complete each other

A long history opposes the political community and the building of a civilization of love, as if the political community had nothing to do with, or were completely opposite, to the principle of contributing to the process of building a society with a human heart. As if also the privilege of the political community stopped before realizing the richness and the potential of the human aspect of the members of any society and as if the political community were supposed to delegate the building of the civilization of love to some “professionals” in this field. Igino Giordani,⁴⁰ on the basis of his experience and perspective as Christian politician, defines the political life as a “service”⁴¹. He defines the political life as “charity in action” and insists by writing (1945) that the political community is the first model of a “national charity”. In fact for the Catholic Church social life “becomes more human the more it is characterized by efforts to bring about a more mature awareness of the ideal towards which it should be oriented, which is the ‘civilization of love’”⁴². The Gospel precept of charity enlightens Christians as to the deepest meaning of political life.

Such civilization of love is never something possessed once and for all; rather it is a process that is to be facilitated by the social order and by the political community. In fact, the social order requires constant improvement; it must be founded on the truth, built on justice and animated by love. It should grow every day toward a more humane balance. In order to make it truly human, “no better way exists... than by fostering an inner sense of justice, benevolence and service of common good, and by strengthening basic beliefs about the true nature of the political community and about the proper exercise and limits of public authority”⁴³.

Conclusion

The mission of the political community is “to direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one's freedom and sense of responsibility”⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ 1894-1980.

⁴¹ Chrétien, politique, écrivain, Edition Nouvelle Cité, 2003, p. 295. *La Rivolta morale*, 1945.

⁴² Paul VI, Message for the 1977 World Day of Peace: AAS 68 (1976), 709.

⁴³ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 73.

⁴⁴ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

According to its nature, the political community can, however, adopt a variety of concrete solutions in its structures and the organization of public authority. For the benefit of the whole human family, these solutions “*must always contribute to the formation of a type of man who will be cultivated, peace-loving and well-disposed towards all his fellow men*”.⁴⁵

In our time, the Catholic Church, by reason of its role and competence, is not to be identified in any way with the political community or a political regime, but it is to be this voice which never stops reminding the different components of the society of the priorities in terms of protecting and defending the image of God which exists in every single man and every single woman. The Church, before asking forgiveness for mistakes done in the past or for things not properly done in the past, can be the consciousness of the world when it does all that it can to live the spirit of the beatitudes in the world, now and today, starting from the present moment. The Catholic Church is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person when it witnesses the greatness of the creation of God who loved His creatures by offering His life as Son upon the Cross, and when it does all that it can to differentiate itself from any particular regime or political system. The Catholic Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other. Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men.

Can the Catholic Church keep questioning the Political Community without adopting a certain practice of democracy in its own institution? In our times, a special obligation binds every single institution to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception. The teaching of Christ praised the universal implications about who counts to be the as the “neighbor”. He recognized the humanity of any person and by doing so he opposed all narrow tribal boundaries limited to one’s own kind. Our time requires us to be actively helping the “near one” when he comes across our path. Our time requires us to look and find the “far one”, the one who is adopting a different system of belief, and who is in need of our support and help. It is an imaginative challenge that pushes us to specific actions of “neighborliness”⁴⁶ as we seek to “*go and do likewise*”. Then the Church will be Catholic.

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 74

⁴⁶ Thomas W. Walker, *Who Is My Neighbor? An Invitation to See the World with Different Eyes*, *Global Neighbors*, 2008, p. 15.

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Abstract

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HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH VIEWS THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY?

The Catholic Church believes that God has created every single person in His own image. God has implemented His own and personal image in the heart of our humanity. The political community, as seen by the Catholic Church, is meant to be the guardian and the witness of this indelible dignity offered and willed by God. The human person created in the image of God means that the purpose and objective of any political community is to defend and promote the “inalienable human rights”. The incarnation of Christ replaces the humanity in the heart of the project of God. By his incarnation, Christ elevates humanity to the dignity of being sons of God. For the Catholic Church, the political community is where one realizes the common good and so it facilitates living together. And by showing his compassion to every single creature, by recognizing the humanity of every single person, Christ leads the way to a civilization of love that can be achieved through the support of the political community.

Key words: **Catholic Church and Political Community, Common good, Indelible human dignity, Civilization of Love , Principle of fraternity**

Резиме

Зиад Фахед

НА КОЈИ НАЧИН КАТОЛИЧКА ЦРКВА ПОСМАТРА ПОЛИТИЧКУ ЗАЈЕДНИЦУ?

Католичка црква сматра да је Бог саздао човека по свом подобију. Бог је уградио своје сопствено подобије у само језгро наше људске природе. Политичка заједница, како је схвата Католичка црква, требало би да буде чувар и сведок овог неизбрисивог достојанства које Бог нуди и прижељкује. Чињеница да су људи створени по подобију божијем, повлачи са собом схватање да је сврха као и крајњи циљ сваке политичке заједнице да брани и унапређује

„неотуђива људска права“. Христово оваплоћење наново поставља људски род у сам центар божијег плана. Својим оваплоћењем, Христос је уздигао људски род до части синова божијих. По схватању Католичке цркве, политичка заједница је тамо где појединац остварује колективно добро унапређујући заједнички живот. Показујући самилост ка сваком живом бићу, откривајући доброту у сваком човеку, Христос нас води ка цивилизацији љубави која се може постићи подршком политичке заједнице.

Кључне речи: католичка црква, политичка заједница, заједничко добро, неизбрисиво људско достојанство, цивилизација љубави, начело братства.