The Once and Future World: 
Global Catholicism amid the Decline of the Liberal World Order

Drew Christiansen, SJ

T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* retells the legend of King Arthur, Britain’s primordial monarch.¹ Building on Sir Thomas Malory’s portrait of Arthur in his *Le Morte d’Arthur* as the paragon of chivalry, White portrays the legendary king as a liberally educated prince, who, with youthful idealism, founds the Knights of the Round Table to displace the regnant “might makes right” assumptions of his contemporaries. A code of chivalry, he believes, will uphold justice, defending the weak and the poor against their oppressors. Gradually, though, the sins of those close to him disabuse Arthur of his dream of building a just kingdom at Camelot. His beloved queen Guinevere betrays him in an affair; Sir Lancelot, his best knight, cuckolds him with Guinevere; and his illegitimate son, Mordred, conspires against him, leading to his final battle.

Published at the height of the Cold War, White’s novel is laced with allusions to sobering events of the twentieth century: the Great War, Europe’s eye-opening immersion in collective evil; the rise of Nazism and anti-Semitism, and the advance of fascism under legal cover; the horrors of mechanized warfare and World War II. *The Once and Future King* is a moral fable about the inevitability of force and the evanescence of justice in human affairs. In the language of Christian realism, the American political theology of that day, Arthur encounters the irreducible reality of original sin and “the impossibility,” as Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, “of realizing the ideal of Christian love in social life.”² And yet, the legend of Arthur maintains the hope of the

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return of a virtuous king who will come again to establish justice in the land: *Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus*, the once and future king. Humanity’s longing for justice will not die.

Humans’ irrepressible desire for justice is a force to bear in mind as we witness the decline of the liberal world order that arose in the wake of World War II and grew to maturity after the fall of Communism in 1989. Its allure began to fade in the last decade with the failure of the Arab Spring, and, with the resurgence of ethno-nationalism across Europe and the United States, it seems to be gravely damaged. This essay examines the close, though not uncritical, relationship between Catholic social teaching, the Church’s social praxis, and the liberal world order over the last seventy years. It also inquires as to what the Church’s role will now be in an illiberal world order marked by electoral democracies led by autocratic rulers, in which rampant xenophobia and ethno-nationalism are on the rise; subversion of the rule of law has become normal; the abuse of human rights has lost its stigma; and disdain for treaty obligations, international law, and international organizations has become routine.

**The Liberal World at Ebb**

*Liberal world order* refers to a set of institutions, practices, and values that emerged after World War II, beginning with Western Europe and

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4 By *praxis*, I mean programmatic efforts to change social conditions in light of Catholic social teaching. Latin American bishops’ conferences refer to it as *social pastoral*, that is, the Church’s pastoral strategy for society. It would include the work of such diverse elements as ecclesial base communities, especially in Brazil; diocesan and national human rights offices; the campaign for relief of Third World debt for the Great Jubilee in 2000; and Vatican diplomacy on issues such as poverty reduction, migration, and nuclear disarmament. On the latter, see Silvano M. Tomasi, *The Vatican in the Family of Nations: Diplomatic Actions of the Holy See at the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).


the United States, and spreading later to the rest of the world, notably post-1989 Eastern Europe. The first institutions included the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Later, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the World Trade Organization were added, and finally came the International Criminal Court, along with localized international tribunals, and truth and reconciliation commissions.

Liberal internationalism values human rights, democracy, pluralism, the rule of law, and a globalized world order. The practices include human rights monitoring, rights enforcement through economic and diplomatic sanctions, collaboration in promotion of socioeconomic development, regional and global trade negotiations, and prevention and enforcement measures against mass atrocities under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

The liberal world order coincided with globalization—not just economic integration through the WTO, regional and transregional trade pacts, and the complex ties of the internet and World Wide Web, but also the growth of social and political integration, and the multiplication and strengthening of global networks and institutions. By the UN’s own account, there are now more than fifty specialized agencies, commissions, funds, and related institutions as part of the UN system today.\(^7\) The capacity of the international community to address many of its gravest threats, such as famine, disease, and interethnic conflict, and to promote human development among the world’s least advantaged populations, as Paul Kennedy has argued, would be gravely reduced without these agencies.\(^8\) The growth of UN agencies has been matched by the growth of international, nongovernmental, civil society organizations and advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (the 2017 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize), and Refugees International.\(^9\)

Consider, for instance, the 2016 West African Ebola crisis. The affected states were too underdeveloped to mount a serious response. Voluntary international responses were disorganized. Only in time did the international community and the World Health Organization come

\(^7\) For the Directory of United Nations System Organization, see http://www.unsceb.org/directory.


\(^9\) A growing edge of international governance in recent years has been the interaction between formal global institutions and civil society, which reached a peak with the passage of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017.
together to overcome the challenge. But when Ebola hit Mbandaka in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2018, not only was the international response rapid, but tens of thousands of doses of a new vaccine had been prepared to inoculate potential victims. Though the Congolese government showed some reluctance to declare an emergency, the world community was organized to intervene to prevent an epidemic. That is sociopolitical globalization at work.

Another (imperfect) example of global integration at the political level is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 2015 plan of the UN Security Council permanent members with Germany and the European Union to curb Iran’s nuclear development. Nations at odds on a variety of fronts came together to negotiate a drawing down of nuclear development with Iran and to enforce it with the reduction or application of sanctions. Now imperiled by the US withdrawal from the agreement, the plan was an example of global political integration in which rivals like the US, Russia, and China could act together on behalf of a common, global goal. International collaboration and multilateral agreements were a hallmark of the liberal world order now under threat. Multilateralism also entailed regional trade pacts like the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Undergirding all these developments was international commitment to a rule-based world order, for which the Holy See has shown unwavering support in its affirmation of the importance of international law and the sanctity of treaties under the ancient Roman law principle pacta sunt servanda.10

Catholicism and the Liberal World Order

Post-Vatican II Catholicism, the social Catholicism informed by Catholic social teaching, was intertwined with the movements and institutions that came to constitute the liberal world order. The quintessential institution of the liberal world order, the EU, was envisaged by Pope Pius XII and implemented by postwar Catholic leaders (Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, and Alcide de Gasperi) to prevent war and secure peace in the wake of two world wars through economic integration.11 Later, in his 1963 encyclical, Pacem in terris, St. Pope John XXIII anticipated the role of human rights as the building


11 For Pius XII’s role in initiating plans for the EU, see Mark Riebling, Church of Spies: The Pope’s Secret War against Hitler (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
block of world peace. Following the Helsinki Accords in 1975, they would become the signature values of the postwar world order.

The Italian journalist Giancarlo Zizola described *Pacem in terris* as “the utopia of Pope John XXIII.” The label utopian, however, did not keep the encyclical from becoming the centerpiece of twentieth-century Catholic political theology and the impetus behind a Catholic human rights movement. Two years later, in 1965, Vatican II identified the promotion of human rights as one of the two principal ways in which the Church serves the world. The council declared, “By no human law can the personal dignity and liberty of [the human person] be so aptly safeguarded as by the gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to the Church.” Likewise, in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI identified the promotion of human rights as integral to the proclamation of the Gospel. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had been published in 1948, the fulsome, human-rights-based political theology of *Pacem in terris* and the Church’s vocal commitment to promotion of human rights anticipated the rights revolution of succeeding decades and stand at the heart of the Church’s interconnection with the liberal world order.

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Human Rights: The Foundation of a New World Order

Beginning with the Helsinki Accords, the late twentieth-century world order came to be marked, on front after front, by the advance of human rights, and the invention of the practices and institutions to secure and enforce them. Rights coverage was extended to a whole range of theretofore marginal groups. Treaties offered protections for racial minorities (1971), women (1979), children (1979), migrants (1986), and people with disabilities (2006). In addition, conventions prohibited torture (1984) and enforced disappearance (2006); and beginning in 2009, the UN took a series of measures to prevent violence against women in wartime.17 Though the UN’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide had entered into force in 1961, it was not ratified by all the Security Council permanent members until 1988 and only began to be enforced in the 1990s with the establishment of various war crimes tribunals and, finally, the International Criminal Court in 2002.

The ICC and its prosecutors are the most prominent of the innovations that safeguard human rights. Among the other enforcement practices are human rights monitors, such as unilateral entities (US Department of State, US Commission on International Religious Freedom), multilateral entities (UN Human Rights Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe–OSCE), and NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International; human rights reporting and UN special rapporteurs; and the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions by individual states, coalitions of states, regional bodies, and the UN. In 2005, a world summit on the sixtieth anniversary of the UN adapted the legal principle of the R2P as a standard of prevention for mass atrocities. Pope Benedict XVI strongly endorsed the R2P in his address to the General Assembly in 2008.

Catholic human rights centers sponsored by bishops’ conferences and individual dioceses, like the Vicariate of Solidarity in Santiago, Chile, and the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, pioneered the monitoring and reporting of rights violations. They also became sources of on-the-ground information to international human rights advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch. Furthermore, during the postconciliar period, Catholic human-rights activists like Lech Wałęsa, Kim Dae-jung, Corazón Aquino, and Carlos Felipe Ximenez Belo helped their countries move out of conflict and along the path to democratic government. Some, including

Wałęsa, Kim, and Belo, have been honored with the Nobel Peace Prize. Others, like Guatemala’s Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera, the staff of the (ecumenical) National Commission for Justice and Peace, in Lahore, Pakistan, and Sister Dorothy Stang in Brazil have earned the martyr’s crown.

**Democracy and Development**

In the liberal world order, human rights and democracy were closely aligned. *Pacem in terris* broke with the legacy of nineteenth-century Roman anti-modernism, summarized in the Syllabus of Errors’ rejection of “progress, liberalism and modern civilization.” by accepting democracy, popular participation, written constitutions, and the divisions of powers. Above all, the common good as the goal of government, John XXIII wrote, consists in “the recognition, respect, safeguarding and promotion of the rights of the human person.”

It was not surprising, therefore, that the Harvard international relations theorist Samuel Huntington asserted that in the last third of the twentieth century, Catholicism proved to be a major force in the “third wave of democratization.” Several democratizing countries, like Portugal, Spain, Poland, and the Philippines, were majority-Catholic countries, and whole regions like South and Central America, where several countries went from dictatorship to democracy, were majority-Catholic areas. “Roughly three-quarters of the countries that transited to democracy between 1974 and 1989,” wrote Professor Huntington, “were predominantly Catholic.”

In Eastern Europe, the influence of St. Pope John Paul II went beyond his native Poland, contributing to democratic movements in what was then Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In his global travels, moreover, John Paul II precipitated change, from Haiti to Timor-Leste. Not all

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19 See PT, §§ 52, 73, 76, 68.
20 PT, § 139. See also §§ 60–61, 77.
22 Huntington, 13.
24 On John Paul II’s personal role in advancing Timorese independence in the face of opposition from the Roman Curia and the Indonesian bishops, see Arnold S. Kohen, *From the Place of the Dead: The Epic Struggles of Bishop Belo of East Timor* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1999).
change emanated from the formidable Polish pope, however. Much credit also goes to national episcopal conferences and vocal and often courageous bishops. The Catholic contribution to democratization, as Huntington wrote, may also be attributed to “the transformation of national Catholic churches from defenders of the status quo to opponents of authoritarianism.”

In addition, the Second Vatican Council’s injunction that bishops speak out on issues of public interest, part of the Church’s witness to justice, produced a generation of bishops better prepared than its predecessors to speak against violations of human rights. Among the notable bishop advocates in this period were Oscar Romero in El Salvador, Patriarch Michel Sabbah in Israel and Palestine, Franjo Komarića in Bosnia, Samuel Ruiz García in Mexico, Cahal Daly in Northern Ireland, Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Belo in Timor-Leste.

By the early 1990s, when sixteen African bishop conciliators met at Duquesne University to share the lessons of their work, thirty-four bishops had served as national conciliators in countries afflicted with civil strife. Finally, Vatican II’s institution of national bishops’ conferences, in the hope of better addressing common problems, provided bishops with staff to advise them on public issues and the colleagueship necessary to deliberate together. The work of the conferences, moreover, was bolstered by the establishment of the Pontifical Commission Justitia et Pax (later the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and now the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development) as an “agency of the universal Church . . . for the worldwide promotion of justice for the poor.”

Ever since the Second Vatican Council, socioeconomic development has been a constant concern of the Church. The council revived the patristic concept of the common purpose of created things—the notion that God had given the bounty of the earth for the good of all, and economic differences should be held within limits so that “the right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone.”

25 Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” 13. Of particular importance were the meetings of CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Council, at Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007).


28 See GS, § 90.

29 GS, § 69.
conferences, in part, for bishops to address social-pastoral policies together, and it called for the establishment of Justitia et Pax “to stimulate the Catholic community to foster progress in needy regions, and social justice on the international scene.” One work of the commission was to link conferences across the North-South divide. One of the signal achievements of that coordination was the campaign for debt relief during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

At the beginning, since many nations in Africa and Asia were only just emerging as independent nations, the Church shared the goal of the UN and the postcolonial powers to promote the economic development of poor nations at the national level. But early on, the Church’s view of development departed from the econometric view of governments, international agencies, and mainline economists who measured development in terms of aggregate economic growth (GNP), the dollar value of goods and service. By contrast, Church teaching insisted that what counted was socioeconomic development and overall improvement in societal well-being and in the social goods like education, health care, parkland and open space—social goods for the whole population to enjoy, not just items for private consumption or products for personal enjoyment. This teaching was consistent with the retrieval of the patristic teaching of the common purpose of created things and with its corollary: Beyond what is needed to satisfy the needs of one’s family, resources are intended for bringing all to sufficiency before the enrichment of a minority.

Especially important to the Church was the inclusion of the poor in the advancing quality of life enjoyed by the wider society and its corollary, namely, the avoidance of inequality, and the challenging ideal of integral human development. The inclusion of the poor in the

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30 GS, § 90.
31 See “Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples (Paul VI, 1967),” in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, §§ 4–8 (hereafter cited as PP). The encyclical had as its focus the needs of poor nations.
32 On socioeconomic development, see PP, §§ 14–21; GS, §§ 63–64; and “Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress (John XXIII, 1961),” in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, §§ 73–81, esp. 79.
development of peoples, thanks to liberation theology, eventually became known as the Church’s “preferential option for the poor.”

Equality received especially sharp focus after the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2007–9 with Benedict XVI’s Caritas in veritate, and it has been regularly a theme of Pope Francis’s teaching, beginning with his inaugural social teaching text, the exhortation Evangelii gaudium, and up through the recent Vatican study Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones. The importance of the issue of inequality is even greater today, when despite several years of economic growth, there has been little wage growth, and calls for a guaranteed annual income grow.

The heart of the Church’s challenge to the econometric view of development came with Paul VI’s concept of “integral human development.” In some ways, the Catholic critique anticipated by many years the articulation of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (2000) and Sustainable Development Goals (2015), which stipulated multiple goals for development policy, including the reduction of absolute poverty for the very poorest. With a richer moral anthropology, however, the Catholic concept of integral human development embraces much more than its secular parallels, moving from less human conditions to ones that are “still more human,” ascending from satisfying basic needs to fostering spiritual experience.

Despite its critique of narrowly economic conceptions of human development, the Church has been attentive to trade as a primary engine of improving standards of living. Beginning with Paul VI’s Populorum progressio (1967), the Church has encouraged the building of equitable and inclusive trade relations. It was regularly a participant in the later rounds

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37 On the preferential option for the poor, see “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern (1987),” in O’Brien and Shannon, Catholic Social Thought, § 42.
41 PP, § 21.
42 PP, §§ 56–65.
of discussions over the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1947–93), and the Holy See continues to be an observer state with the WTO.43

From Globalization to Global Solidarity

Lastly, decades before globalization became fodder for journalists, pundits, and think-tank task forces, the Church engaged with it in a critical way. The Second Vatican Council took note that “every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world.”44 Even before the internet, the council saw a process of socialization—Americans might call it “networking”—increasing “reciprocal ties and mutual dependencies” and giving rise to “associations and organizations, both public and private.”45 The council went on to affirm that the Church as the sacrament of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human family has a mission to foster the unity of humankind.46 As a universal church, she has a special obligation to foster the welfare of all people and especially the needy everywhere.47 In addition, she bears a responsibility to foster “today’s social movements, ... a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic realms.”48 In this sense, globalization in Catholic social teaching refers to more than the growth of economic and political ties. It also includes the networking of people, as in human rights groups, scientific research teams, and environmental movements agitating about climate change and defending forests and endangered species.

Church teaching singled out globalization as a social process of networking years before globalization became associated with economic integration and well before the spread of social media. It was attuned to this process because of its catholicity, which had made the Church a “transnational actor” before social scientists invented the term.49 The

44 GS, § 26.
45 GS, § 25.
46 GS, § 42.
47 GS, § 42.
48 GS, § 42.
Church’s sensitivity to globalization was also the expression of Catholic social theory’s emphasis since the Middle Ages on society. Beyond society’s role as an intermediate stratum of social analysis between individual persons and the political sphere, socialization reflected the belief in humanity as a social and political animal, which forms groups to pursue common concerns and interests.\footnote{On the proliferation of social organizations in the thirteenth century, see Georges de Lagarde, *La naissance de l'esprit laique au déclin du Moyen Âge*, vol. 1 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948). On the Church as a modern transnational actor, see David Ryall, “The Catholic Church as a Transnational Actor,” in *Non-State Actors in World Politics*, ed. Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (London: Palgrave, 2001), 41–58.} While mid-twentieth-century theorists emphasized the autonomy and subsidiarity of “intermediate associations,” as both Catholic and secular conservatives still do today, papal teaching in particular has treated socialization as a phenomenon integral to the contemporary world.\footnote{See *GS*, §§ 25, 75.} Socialization is rich in its potential for good, both in disseminating an evolving quality of life to wider and wider circles of society, and also in helping to perfect humanity’s capabilities for good.\footnote{On sharing in the improving quality of life, see *Mater et Magistra*, §§ 77–81 (on the provisions required by the common good), and Christiansen, “On Relative Equality,” 651–75. On perfecting human capabilities, see *PP*, §§ 19–21, esp. 21.}

Soon, however, the Church identified the inadequacy of the moral resources available to humanize the global integration wrought by economic and technological forces. John XXIII pointed to a normative remedy for global ills like the nuclear arms race in articulation of “the universal common good,” translating the traditional goal of political society into a moral super-norm for a global world order.\footnote{See *PT*, §§ 132–41.} For their parts, John Paul II, in the wake the one-sided growth of transnational economic life, and Benedict XVI, in response to the world financial crisis in 2008, urged an ethic of global solidarity to correspond to the levels of material interdependence.\footnote{On the need for solidarity, see *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, § 38; and “Caritas in Veritate: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth (2009),” in O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, §§ 12–13, 19 (hereafter cited as *CV*). On the need for strengthening and improving the institutions of global governance, see *CV*, § 67.} Francis also took up the need for the development and reform of global institutions in his encyclical *Laudato si*’.\footnote{See Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, CS, “Pope Francis’ Vision of an Inclusive Word Economy,” World Hunger website, November 9, 2016, https://www.worldhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Pope-Francis-vision-of-an-inclusive-global-economy-by-Archbishop-Silvano-Tomasi.pdf.} In an age of nationalistic populism, the Church’s advocacy for global governance...
will be suspect. But its goal is equitable and inclusive development, and papal and Vatican proposals in this direction are always expounded in conjunction with the principle of subsidiarity.\(^{56}\) As John XXIII wrote in *Pacem in terris*, the “purpose [of the global public authority] is to create, on a world basis, an environment in which the public authorities of each state, its citizens, and intermediate associations can carry out their tasks, fulfill their duties and exercise their rights with greater security.”\(^{57}\) While states may regard themselves as the ultimate locus of loyalty, the Church never forgets that all people belong to the one human family under God and, whatever their nation of origin, bear obligations to universal solidarity.\(^{58}\)

**Ecclesial Leadership in an Illiberal World**

Catholicism and the liberal world order possessed a high degree of congruence. The Church came late to accepting some basic liberal values, like democracy, human rights, religious liberty, and interreligious dialogue. But once the Second Vatican Council, following John XXIII’s lead in *Pacem in terris*, turned its back on anti-modernism and accepted liberal values and adopted a method of dialogue with the world and other religions, the Church became one of the primary promoters of the liberal order, defending human rights, promoting democracy, advocating for equitable socioeconomic development, and taking the lead on both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

Some values of the liberal international order came more naturally to Catholicism. The rule of law and the associated respect for treaties, for example, had been upheld by both the Roman law tradition and Scholastic political theory.\(^{59}\) Transnationalism grew out the Church’s own catholic character, and as a transnational actor, the Church possessed an affinity for transnational institution building. In the face of an array of global challenges, the papacy has upped the case for a global public authority.

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57 *PT*, § 141.


authority “to manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the [2008 financial] crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration.”

Furthermore, in his 2008 visit to the UN, Benedict XVI strongly endorsed the most ambitious political achievement of globalization, the R2P, a legal principle that overrides the traditional Westphalian assumptions of state sovereignty and nonintervention for the protection of men and women who are victimized by their own governments or left unprotected by them.

The growth of international civil society in the late twentieth century, moreover, was consistent with Catholic social theory’s defense of “mediating institutions” and the Church’s pastoral ministry to workers, agriculturalists, and indigenous and other marginal groups. Francis, in particular, has identified with these popular movements. Likewise, the Church’s historical experience in ministering to migrants and refugees and its presence today among guest workers and economic migrants has made it active in defense of the rights of people on the move. Catholic countries, like the Philippines and Latin American states, are the suppliers of cheap and exploited labor to more prosperous regions of the world. Often, however, the Church’s teaching on the right to migrate, even for economic motives, has exceeded the willingness of states to receive and integrate these hapless souls into host societies.

What will the social teaching and pastoral ministry of the Church become in confrontation with an illiberal world politics in which autocrats and tyrants are in the ascendant, universal human rights are

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60 CV, § 67.


63 With intellectual and pastoral roots in the theology of the people, Francis, beginning in 2015, has tried to convoque yearly meetings of popular movements excluded from the corridors of power in both the liberal world order and in today’s illiberal order.
abused and denied, economic wealth grows ever more unequal, treaties are broken and the rule of law ignored, refugees and economic migrants become a global underclass, religion is invoked for nationalistic purposes, and the essential demands of justice are ignored or, worse, scorned?

The collapse of the liberal world order has been underway for a decade or more. In the last two years, however, it has rapidly accelerated with right-wing, populist governments advancing not only in Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) but in the West as well—in Austria, Italy, and the United States. John Bolton, the US national security adviser, has made it clear that the goal of the Trump Administration’s foreign policy is to eliminate international institutions of every sort. Thus, the president has abandoned the WTO and disowned both the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the North American Free Trade Agreement to announce unilateral trade negotiations. He has derided NATO and the EU, and he has divided the US from its allies in North America and Europe. Furthermore, the administration has withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council and the Global Compact on climate change, and it has refused to participate in negotiations on a new global compact for migration. The administration has also made numerous attempts, foiled by the courts, to prevent migration of disfavored groups, especially Muslims, to the US and to drastically reduce the number of asylum-seekers admitted to the country.

The Church’s role in an illiberal world will, to some extent, depend on how direct the challenges facing the Church become. In some countries—for example, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nicaragua—bishops and episcopal conferences are already becoming the de facto opposition to tyrannical regimes. Along the Mexican–US border, the bishops of both countries have come together to protest the harsh treatment of asylum-seekers and especially the inhumanity of separating migrant children from their parents. But protests have not yet matured into confrontation. For some US church leaders, however, the Trump Administration’s pro-life policies create disincentives for dissenting more vocally from the government’s immigration, economic, and labor policies. In Nicaragua, bishops and clergy have provided sanctuary for dissidents and attempted to mediate between the Ortega government and the protestors, but their initiatives have been rejected. In the DRC, the bishops have been successful in

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getting President Kabila to step down and clearing the way for new elections. Most of these conflicts, however, are continuations of old tensions. Bishops have been at odds with Congolese dictators for decades, and Nicaragua represents a repetition of a twentieth century–style conflict of popular movements and a Latin strongman. The Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte represents the kind of transgressive populist leader in the mode of Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, or Donald Trump, who has rejected the liberal world order. Only Matteo Salvini seems to have modified his policies in light of Italy’s need for financial support from the EU.

For purposes of argument, I assume that the Catholic Church will continue to address these recurring tensions in majority-Catholic countries, as it has done in the past, and in minority-Catholic countries when conditions grow especially oppressive. The pattern will not be uniform, but bishops will continue to speak out, mediate national conflicts, and support Church personnel engaged in social-pastoral ministry. The new question will be, how will the Church respond to illiberal government at the national and international levels? What social-pastoral strategies are available to it? What models of ecclesial leadership might be used to address the problems of illiberal politics and an illiberal world order?

Models of Pastoral Leadership in an Illiberal World

Across two millennia, the Catholic Church has co-existed with various kinds of political order. It has dealt with Roman and German emperors, kingdoms and parliamentary democracies, fascists and communists, African “big men,” and Latin American caudillos. The Church has not had a uniform policy toward troubled political settings. Sometimes the Vatican has taken the lead. Often local bishops and bishops’ conferences have set the agenda. In the postconciliar era, popes have engaged special assemblies of the Synod of Bishops to deal with troubled countries and regions: Lebanon, Africa, Asia, America (South and North together), Oceania, and the Middle East. Regional bishops’ conferences (Latin American Episcopal Council; Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar; Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East) have endeavored to set forth social-pastoral programs.

But regions can vary in their approach to similar issues. Take, for example, the case of religious liberty. As an archbishop in Poland, Karol Wojtyla applied Vatican II’s Dignitatis humanae very differently in his struggle with Polish and Soviet authorities than the US bishops did in a country where the reigning interpretation of the declaration vindicated
what John Courtney Murray interpreted as “the American experiment” in the separation of church and state—actually, free exercise of religion combined with government noninterference. In Latin America, where at the time of the council and in the years following, many countries were ruled by dictators or military juntas, the Church’s teaching on religious liberty began to be taught only in the late 1990s.65

The Middle East was one area where the Holy See was directly involved in promoting the rights of Catholics as citizens of their respective states, with mixed results. Beginning with the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See, Vatican policy, informed by Gaudium et spes and Dignitatis humanae, sought to secure the religious liberty of all citizens as a means of protecting Catholics rather than seeking special guarantees for the Church itself and its sacramental ministries, as had been the case under early twentieth-century concordats.66 But after a quarter century, Israel has ratified neither the Fundamental Agreement nor subsequent legal entities and fiscal agreements, and difficulties continue. As a result, issues like taxation of Church properties in Jerusalem, which should have been resolved under terms of the three treaties, still arise.67 A similar agreement in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, by contrast, has contributed to a positive relationship between the local church, the Vatican, and the government.

Following the Synod of Lebanon (1995), the Vatican attempted to replace the confessionalism that had undergirded the Lebanese state with religious liberty for all its citizens in combination with support for interreligious (Muslim-Christian) dialogue, but progress along those lines was halting. In 2013, the Holy See formally recognized the State of Palestine, and in 2017 the two exchanged ambassadors. The larger point


is that Church responses may not be uniform across countries, and even where one policy is applied, the results will vary from country to country and region to region.

**Five Social-Pastoral Strategies**

Variations in social-pastoral strategies to address the advance of illiberalism will arise for all sorts of reasons—tensions within the Roman Curia, the cohesion or lack thereof of episcopal conferences, the quality of the Church’s relationships with civil society, the political ideologies of governments, deep prejudices within a society, and, of course, the pastoral dispositions of the pope, just to name a few. Understanding that Church policy may be affected and even changed by any of these factors, allow me to explore five strategies for Catholic social-pastoral strategy in the “illiberal age.” They are the (1) synodal model,68 (2) patriarchate model, (3) prophetic model, (4) convenor model, and (5) servant model. At various times, Francis has mused about the first two. The others I take from the practice of recent papacies and the servant ecclesiology of Vatican II.

**Synodal Model**

Conferring the pallium on new archbishops on the Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, June 29, 2013, Francis told the new metropolitan bishops, “Let us go forward on the path of synodality and grow in harmony with the service of primacy.”69 Following this pronouncement, Francis has endeavored to renew the Synod of Bishops, convening them over two successive years; encouraging bishops’ conferences to consult actively with the faithful; urging the participating bishops to bold, outspoken speech (parrhesia); and making the apostolic exhortation a regular teaching document in the way we have grown used to regarding encyclicals, but with a clear effort to include the voices of bishops and their

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national conferences, as well as that of the pope—a clear contrast with the “ecclesiastical positivism” of John Paul II’s teaching. The inclusion of not only propositions of the synod but also pronouncements of local and regional bishops’ conferences makes the exhortations emphatically universal teaching documents. Francis’s exhortations, moreover, have taken a decidedly pastoral turn, reflecting in detail, for example, on the preparation of homilies in Evangelii gaudium and specifying the qualities of pastoral accompaniment for engaged couples and the divorced in Amoris laetitia.

Post-synodal exhortations have always aimed at providing guidance for implementing synodal recommendations or the social-pastoral strategy proposed by a synod. With Francis, post-synodal apostolic exhortations also have a decidedly pastoral character. On the one hand, they aim at meeting specific pastoral challenges like that of communion for divorced and remarried Catholics (Amoris laetitia). On the other, they have become vehicles for detailed guidance aimed at making the whole Church a community of active disciples (Evangelii gaudium). While Francis eschews giving a universal response to the day’s questions, he shares with his model Paul VI a vision of the Church as a community of communities, where all are called to discern “the signs of the times.” The richness of the practical suggestions in the exhortations shows his desire that the Church be a living society known by its deeds and character as much as, if not more than, its doctrines. The thrust of his teaching is summed up in Jesus’ maxim, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

Convening a synod in response to any one of the problems presented by an illiberal world order—migration, human rights, human trafficking, financial reform, global order, and so on—offers the advantage of gathering perspectives from different regions of the world, particularly those most adversely affected by the development in question. It also offers the opportunity to educate representative bishops and to encourage their engagement, as well as that of their conferences, in a social-pastoral strategy of response. In addition, bishops in synods can build solidarity across borders on common problems and address issues posed by great powers for which other more vulnerable nations bear the cost.

70 The phrase was coined by Professor David Kelley of Duquesne University to point to the self-referential quality of John Paul II’s citations to his own previous teachings.
The synod itself is an ecumenical response on the part of the global Church (the ecumené), an antidote to the nationalist, xenophobic, and ethnocratic values cultivated by the illiberal governments of the twenty-first century.\(^{72}\)

There are shortcomings to the synodal model, however. While Francis has introduced the voices of laypeople to the floor of the synod, there is little by the way of expert input to both the floor and small-group discussions. Unlike most conciliar processes, the bishops lack expert backup. (Appointed experts, or periti, spend most of their time reviewing and summarizing the bishops’ floor discussions, synthesizing and reformulating proposals made by the bishops.) In the late Middle Ages, theologians, university rectors, and others also participated in councils. They could contribute expert theological counsel directly to the assembly. Similarly, in keeping with the maturation of modern societies, increased participation by laypeople needs to be improved.

Another shortcoming is the uneven nature of implementation and subsequent feedback. While the capacity to implement synodal decisions may vary among dioceses and episcopal conferences, certainly the larger and more developed local churches ought to be required to be more accountable to decisions of synods as a governing authority in the faith, as synods were in earlier ages. The legacy of the Church’s “long nineteenth century” is that, for many, only the pope and the Roman Curia are regarded as authoritative. Firmly establishing the authority of the synod is a task that lies ahead of us, especially if the Catholic response to an illiberal world comes through the synodal model. There are possibilities for the correction of this shortcoming in the Council of Cardinals’ proposal for curial reform, in which the Curia would serve as staff to the world’s bishops, not just to the pope.

Finally, while the synod may ideally draw wisdom from the universal Church, differences between cultures and regions may make it more difficult to achieve reform, especially along the lines projected by Western progressives, for example, on issues like the role of women or episcopal accountability. On the other hand, synods, especially the two-year pattern initiated by Francis, could provide occasion for the conversion of the participating bishops, like that which took place among the

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\(^{72}\) See Linden, *Global Catholicism*. While Linden wrote before the current pontificate and the crisis of globalization, his analysis built on Vatican II’s definition of the Church as a sacrament “of the unity of the human family” (*Lumen gentium*, § 1) and a servant of the world (*GS*, § 11).
bishops at Vatican II and generated a transformative agenda among them.

Patriarchal Model

Organizing the Church along the lines of patriarchates is a second suggestion Francis has made for renewing church governance. Patriarchates are an ancient form of church governance. In the first millennium, there were five patriarchates: Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. Each was said to have its origin with a founding apostle. They were characterized by different languages, theological cultures, and liturgical traditions, and were limited to particular polities or territories. The Eastern churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, are still organized this way. Early in his pontificate, Francis suggested reorganizing the Church along patriarchal lines.73 The proposal called for extending patriarchal status to larger episcopal conferences and regions outside the confines of the Mediterranean and Eastern European worlds. It is doubtful that Francis intended these patriarchates be autocephalous, that is, fully self-governing, as in the Orthodox national churches of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but rather on the model of the churches sui juris of the Eastern Catholic Church. While he has not formally advanced the idea further, he has taken steps to devolve authority to bishops’ conferences—for example, ceding to them approval over liturgical texts. As with the synod, the proposal for putting the Roman Curia at the service of the world’s bishops through their episcopal conferences could make the patriarchate model both more effective and, at the same time, help curb the fissiparous tendencies of regional autonomy.

Patriarchal governance would give the Church the diverse face Francis favors so much, with each region of the Church enculturating the Gospel in its unique way, glorifying God through its multifarious expressions.74 Uniformity along traditional Roman lines would decline, but unity would be preserved through the communion of the other patriarchs with the

73 For proposals for restructuring the universal Church along patriarchal lines, see Archbishop John R. Quinn’s Ever Ancient, Ever New: Structures of Communion in the Church (New York: Paulist Press, 2013); and Quinn, The Reform of the Papacy: The Costly Call to Christian Unity (New York: Crossroad, 1999). Quinn died in 2017 but, following Francis’s election, reported that the new pope had read his two books and favored his proposals.

bishop of Rome. In addition, each region would be able to discern and respond to the signs of the times as suited to regional and global conditions. As in the Middle East, a council of patriarchs in communion with the pope could consult, coordinate, and oversee the Church’s mission to the world in their region.

One serious difficulty with the patriarchal approach is the risk of cultural capture and its corollary, Caesaropapism, that is, subordination of the Church to political leadership. We already see cultural-political capture in Eastern Europe, where, contrary to Catholic social teaching and Gospel values, national bishops’ conferences have failed to critique the xenophobic and antimigrant policies of the illiberal governments in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. Francis, it appears, has been reluctant to challenge them, as he seems to have refrained, with the exception of Chile, from correcting passive or even recalcitrant bishops and their conferences when they do not share his social-pastoral vision. Due to the risk of cultural capture, the patriarchate model may be the least capable of addressing the problems posed by the illiberal world order. At another time with a more outward-looking Zeitgeist, the patriarchate model may be better situated to produce its variegated fruit for the benefit of the Church catholic.

The cultural rootedness of the patriarchal model might also make for divisions, not only between patriarchates, but also within them, as we have seen in the tensions between the Russian Orthodox in Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate, and, in turn, between Moscow and Constantinople. Latin America, a region that has had perhaps the greatest experience of inter-conference collaboration through the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM)—with renowned meetings at Medellín, Puebla, and Aparecida, which set common social-pastoral programs—has within it racial, cultural, and historical strains that could make for a more variegated approach to social, cultural, and political problems. However, divergences between conferences might also lead to alienation between national churches or between larger conferences and smaller ones within the same patriarchate.

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Prophetic Model

By prophetic model, I mean a universal social-pastoral message that is brought to bear directly on situations of violence, injustice, and inhumanity. John Paul II was an exemplar of this model of social-pastoral ministry. He was explicit about the prophetic dimension of reading the signs of the times. While he insisted on the primacy of proclaiming the Gospel, he asserted that “the condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelization in the social field which is an aspect of the Church’s prophetic role” and “gives [proclamation] true solidity and the force of higher motivation.”76 One of his contributions to the method of reading the signs of the times as a feature of Catholic social teaching was to insist on identifying negative signs of the times.77 The late pope was also not afraid to chide his audiences for their indifference, as he did in addressing an American audience in Detroit, Michigan, on his 1987 visit to the US, for their indifference to the poor:

In a setting similar to this one some eight years ago in New York’s Yankee Stadium, I proclaimed the Gospel challenge contained in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. You are all familiar with this marvelous lesson in social responsibility which Jesus left us. Knowing your faith and your openness to challenge, I now ask you today: What have you done with that parable? How many times in the past eight years have you turned to that parable to find inspiration for your Christian lives? Or have you put it aside thinking that it was no longer relevant to you or to the situations in your country?78

That same year, Sollicitudo rei socialis critiqued “the logic of blocs,” whereby Cold War arms competition deprived the poor of resources necessary for their development.79 In turn, US neoconservatives, who until that time had revered the pope as a bulwark of anti-communism, roundly criticized the encyclical for its “moral equivalency”—finding fault with the Western bloc as well as the Eastern, Soviet bloc. Prophecy plays no favorites.

Convenor Model

While often overlooked in scholarly surveys, the convenor model is amply exemplified by the pastoral practice of bishops, bishops’ conferences, and Francis’s own ministry. As a public body, the Church has a

76 Sollicitudo rei socialis, § 41.
77 See Sollicitudo rei socialis, §§ 14–25.
79 Sollicitudo rei socialis, § 20.
The distinctive advantage of embracing a wide range of groups sometimes in conflict, and bishops as the leaders of these communities have the capacity to bring these groups together for the sake of the common good. The convenor model envisages the Church, through the bishop, diocese, episcopal conference, Roman Curia, or pope himself, bringing diverse groups together for the sake of the common good.

A classic example comes from the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, in southern Louisiana (USA). Some years ago, farmers and watermen (seafood harvesters) in the diocese were at odds because of the effects of petroleum production in the Gulf region. In addition to pollution, subsidence of the land due to oil extraction led not only to loss of coastal land and marshes, but also to the intrusion of saltwater, poisoning the land for agriculture. Because its parishioners came from all the affected communities, the diocese was able to bring the partisans together to address the problem.

In a better known case, in the 1970s the bishops of Appalachia, a multistate region in the eastern United States stretching from New York to Georgia, brought together a wide range of groups—miners, mine owners, energy companies, poor people’s groups, and social service agencies, as well as other churches—for consultations on the needs of this historically poor region. Their 1975 pastoral letter, This Land Is Home to Me, gave a moving voice to the suffering and aspirations of the people of Appalachia. Twenty years later, as consciousness of the environmental crisis grew, the bishops issued a follow-up letter, At Home in the Web of Life.80

Other examples include Bishop Anthony Pilla’s “Church in the City” initiative, which drew together people and groups from inner-city Cleveland, the outer suburbs, and rural areas to address issues of poverty, development, and the environment.81 It became the basis for other convening efforts in several dioceses around the Great Lakes Basin, which brought together various constituencies around issues of urban sprawl, including housing, jobs, land use, and water and air quality.

Another signal effort was the series of conferences convened in the 1980s by Bishop John Cummins of Oakland, California, bringing together

weapons scientists from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and theologians and ethicists from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley to discuss the US bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, and explore its implementation. Like the other convenings, the Oakland meetings, under the auspices of the bishop, were able to assemble people on opposite sides of a serious issue and allow them to listen to one another, come to understand one another, and explore solutions favorable to the common good. Such meetings are part of the teaching office of the bishop in promoting what Francis calls a “listening and learning” church. Not only do they help inform the bishop or bishops for later pronouncements and pastoral plans of action, but they also stimulate greater public investment in such statements when they are issued and in programs when they are initiated. They also contribute to the real social authority of Church teaching in the public arena. As long as there are margins of freedom to assemble and express public views, the convenor model will serve an important counterweight to the illiberal world order, seeding ideas, building coalitions, and promulgating the Gospel in an often-hostile world.

Francis himself, along with the Roman Curia, also employs the convenor model, especially in his convenings of popular movements in Rome, Santa Cruz (Bolivia) and Modesto, California (USA). They are very much a part of the theology of the people, in which the Holy Father was involved as a bishop in Argentina. In conjunction with the preparation and rollout of his environmental encyclical *Laudato si’*, Francis assembled an array of experts and activists to inform him. His convening power is recognized by leaders outside the Church. For example, he was invited to address the assembly of leaders drafting the Paris Agreement and the conference negotiating the UN’s Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. He showed his support for that treaty by gathering diplomats, Nobel Peace Prize winners, and civic leaders to the Vatican symposium “Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament.” It was there on November 10, 2017, that he publicly condemned nuclear deterrence (the possession of and threat to use nuclear weapons). In an illiberal world, such convenings are likely to become more common, as the Church gathers with similarly oriented political,

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civic, and humanitarian leaders, as well as representatives of other churches and religions, to uphold the values enshrined in Catholic social teaching, which were also part of post–World War II and post–Cold War international consensus.

Unlike synodality or patriarchates, the Church as convenor is not a mode of governance in the strict sense, but it is a tool of social-pastoral ministry, both implementing and informing Church teaching. But insofar as governance also has an educational dimension, the convenor role is an especially effective way to teach and enculturate Gospel values.

Servant Church Model

Finally, we come to the model of the Church as servant of the world, which was central to the Second Vatican Council. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

The council went on to identify the defense of human rights and the promotion of unity as chief among the ways in which the Church serves the world. Pope Francis lives out the vision of the servant church, especially in his care, in the words of the council, for those who are “poor or in any way afflicted.” In his early interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, SJ, he explained, “I see the Church as a field hospital after battle.” Before anything else, “you have to heal [the] wounds [of a seriously injured person]. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.”

The Holy Father has put his principle into practice, notably with refugees and the homeless. His trips to Lampedusa and Lesbos to draw attention to the plight of refugees and his outreach to Rome’s homeless, providing beds, food, and showers within the Vatican, are expressions of a servant church.

Similarly, through the global response of Caritas Internationalis, the network of Catholic charity organizations, to weather emergencies, or the work of religious and lay workers in clinics for HIV and AIDS,

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84 GS, § 1.
85 GS, § 11.
86 GS, §§ 41 and 42.
patients and in hostels for migrants and refugees, the Church acts as servant to the world. In an illiberal world, the Church’s works of mercy will serve more than a symbolic and exemplary purpose. They will be necessary deeds of solidarity with what will inevitably become growing numbers of marginalized and dispossessed men and women. Like the heroic saints known for their extensive charity following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the charitable work of the Church may become a bulwark for the poor and outsiders in a “throwaway” world. Charitable undertakings are, after all, part of the Church’s DNA, as essential as liturgy and doctrine.

Where possible, the Church will continue to exercise what Benedict XVI called institutional or political charity, the encouraging and building of just social and political institutions. It will not be alone in this effort. The multiplication of governmental and inter-governmental institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and humanitarian movements will insure for some time that the Church will have allies in much of this work. But as governments withdraw their support and the public grows suspicious of such undertakings, the Church will be called upon to aid those who have been abandoned by public authorities, whether they are refugees, the poor, or the victims of violence. Ideally, it would involve the Church at every level and in every form, in all its communities and movements. An illiberal world will highlight the Church’s servant identity.

A Church of Disciples in an Illiberal World

The models I propose are not exclusive. They represent different aspects of the Church and different strategies for social-pastoral praxis. While the first two, the synodal and patriarchal models, may be alternatives for church governance, they are so within limits. Even today, representatives of the Oriental Patriarchates participate in the Roman Synod, so to some extent, the two models can overlap. But the other models—the prophetic, the convenor, and the servant models—are

89 See Benedict XVI, Deus caritas est: God is Love, encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 25, 2005, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, § 25: “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia).”
90 CV, § 7.
mutually compatible, and their overlapping strategies have and can be used in confronting the illiberal world order.

As the institutions of the liberal world order are eroded and dismantled, the fundamental challenge facing the Church will be to sustain the dignity of the human person and the integrity of creation in a climate of chauvinism, xenophobia, and contempt for the other. The Church will not be alone in this undertaking, as the liberal order generated many institutions, voluntary groups, and movements that also can be expected to wage resistance in the name of the common good. The Church will have special resources in its social teaching, practice of social ministry, and, especially, the spiritual wells that give rise to hope in the darkest times. For inspiration, it can look back to the darkest days of the Nazi ascendancy and World War II and draw inspiration from Pius XII’s efforts to lay the foundations for a postwar peace, which gave us the EU and the liberal world order. Likewise, it can draw strength from John XXIII, who bequeathed us a vision of a peace in Pacem in terris at the height of the Cold War. That vision is built on respect for human rights and service of the universal common good.91 Within living memory, Catholicism has known hours of darkness and shone light on the path out. It will do so again.

91 See notes 9 and 10 above.