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**Pope Francis on Better Politics**

**James J. Bacik**

As a nation, we have to find ways of overcoming partisan polarization and working together to preserve our democracy and promote the common good. To this end, let us examine the social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship,* issued on October 4, 2020, by Pope Francis. The Italian phrase “*Fratelli Tutti,*” literally translated “Brothers All,” was used by Saint Francis of Assisi to address his followers. Using this phrase as a title has been criticized as sexist by respected female and male theologians, who have also noted no women authors are included in the 285 footnotes. Beyond this initial criticism, the encyclical has generated a good deal of lively discussion.

The fifth chapter of the 134-page encyclical, entitled “A Better Kind of Politics,” presents the pope’s vision of a political order that serves the common good (n154-169). Francis begins by discussing various forms of “populism,” which in the United States context has typically viewed ordinary people in an adversarial relationship to political, economic, cultural and media elites. He identifies an “unhealthy populism,” which involves politicians exploiting a people’s culture for their own personal advantage: for example, seeking popularity “by appealing to the basest and most selfish inclinations of certain sections of the population” (n159). Insisting that he has “no intention of proposing an irresponsible populism,” Francis warns against elected leaders who cater to popular demands to get elected, without a consistent effort “to generate the resources people need to develop and earn a living by their own efforts and creativity” (n161).

The pope argues that we need a “healthy populism” in order to preserve “the very notion of democracy as government by the people.” The people as a whole have an “evangelical instinct” manifested in the “mysticism of their daily lives.“ By forming communities within society, the people are capable of developing “shared goals that transcend their differences” and of engaging in a “common endeavor.” The collective aspirations of the people enable them to carry out long-term projects for the common good (n157). “Not everything the people does is good,” but as a community with a shared identify arising from social and cultural bonds, they can gradually advance toward common goals (n158).

Authentic popular leaders are capable of interpreting the feelings and cultural dynamics of a people and of detecting significant trends in society. They unite and lead the people by providing an “enduring vision of transformation and growth” that makes room “for others in the pursuit of the common good.”

Pope Francis also uses the concept of a healthy populism to criticize a type of liberalism that views society as “merely the sum of coexisting interests” and that celebrates freedom “without roots in a shared narrative.” This type of liberalism, which dismisses an inclusive populism as a romantic ideal, tends to devalue societal organizations and civic institutions. Failing to recognize the disruptive power of human weakness, it puts too much faith in the power of rational planning to ensure a bright future and provide solutions to every problem.

In offering his own approach to an effective political order, the pope bypasses the traditional Catholic reliance on justice as the guiding norm and emphasizes instead the role of “true charity.” Charity unites the personal and the institutional dimensions of a healthy human life. In order to flourish, our personal relationships need the protection of the public order and the resources that societal institutions can generate. In the Good Samaritan Parable, which provides the biblical backdrop for the whole encyclical, the charitable foreigner needed the nearby inn to carry out his mission of mercy. Love of neighbor must make use of all available institutional resources to “bring about historical change that can benefit the poor and disadvantaged” (n165).

Too often, “individualistic ways of acting” in the political arena benefit the wealthy, while “the majority of those left behind remains dependent on the goodwill of others.” From his global perspective, Francis insists that this inequality demands “a greater spirit of fraternity” as well as a “more efficient world-wide organization” to assist those “suffering and dying in poor countries.” Given the complexity of our social problems, the pope recognizes that there is “no one solution” or “economic recipe that can be applied indiscriminately to all” (n165).

This takes Francis to the center of his political message: “Everything then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitude and lifestyles.” Without this conversion, “political propaganda, the media and the shapers of public opinion will continue to promote an individualistic and uncritical culture subservient to unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who clearly enjoy too much power” (n166). The pope recognizes that his emphasis on personal conversion runs up against what the Christian tradition calls “concupiscence,” the “human inclination to be concerned only with myself, my group, my own petty interests.” Reflecting his own deep Christian faith, he quickly adds a hopeful note: “Concupiscence, however, can be overcome with the help of God” (n166).

Without going into detail, the pope recognizes that improving the political process, so that society can react against injustice and the abuse of power, requires “education and upbringing, concern for others, a well-integrated view of life and spiritual growth.”

Recognizing that among many people today “politics is a distasteful word,” Francis calls for a “renewed appreciation of politics as a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity in as much as it seeks the common good” (n180). The pope argues for a “political charity” which recognizes “all people are our brothers and sisters” and seeks “forms of social friendship that include everyone.” He insists that talk of political charity is not utopian, but can serve as a call to include “social processes of fraternity and justice for all” (n180). Charity, which is the “synthesis of the entire Law,” as Jesus taught us, is the inspiration for the Church’s social doctrine. Charity finds expression not only in intimate relationships but also in “macro-relationships: social, economic and political“ that seek to “build a better world” (n181). Political charity “transcends every individualistic mindset” and moves us to seek “the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons, but also in the social dimension that unites them.” For Francis, two things are true: “Each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people” and “There are no peoples without respect for the individuality of each person.” Therefore, “good politics” resists the constant temptation to “reduce persons to isolated individuals “easily manipulated” by powerful forces. It concentrates on “building communities at every level of social life, in order to recalibrate and reorient globalization and thus avoid its disruptive effects” (n182).

With “its impulse to universality,” political charity is a “force capable of inspiring new ways of profoundly renewing structures, social organizations and legal systems from within.” An effective social charity is “accompanied by a commitment to the truth” that keeps it from falling prey to “contingent subjective emotions and opinions,” to various forms of relativism, and to narrow views that fail to promote “human development of universal range” (n184). Furthermore, the commitment to truth, illumined by reason and faith, respects the contributions of the sciences to finding the “most practical means” for serving human development (n185).

Near the end of chapter five, Pope Francis offers many suggestions on how political leaders should function (n190-197). Ideally, “Politicians are doers, builders with ambitious goals,” who have a “broad, realistic and pragmatic gaze that looks beyond their own borders.” Their biggest concern should not be their standings in the polls, but should be “finding effective solutions” to the “social and economic exclusion” that leads to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, drug and weapons trade, terrorism and organized crime. To deal with these problems, politicians should “foster encounter” and “seek convergence” in order to help create a “beautiful polyhedral reality in which everyone has a place” (n190). In this process, it is important to hear “different voices” and avoid a stifling uniformity. Francis wants politicians who have a “tender heart” and who attend to the “smallest, the weakest, the poorest” of our brothers and sisters, confident that “no genuine effort is meaningless.” The pope insists that “good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts.” He suggests elected leaders ask themselves not how many people voted for me, but “what good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me” (n197).

Although *Fratelli Tutti* is addressed to an international audience, much of what Francis says about politics can be applied to our situation in the United States.

We need his reminder that in essence politics is a noble calling and that we are blessed with many elected officials and career public servants at all levels who work hard to serve the common good.

We have a responsibility to encourage our politicians to follow the pope’s advice to work collaboratively to meet the real needs of their constituents, including the most vulnerable.

We need a broad-based national discussion of the exclusive, adversarial populism, so prevalent in our country today, keeping in mind the more inclusive populism proposed by Francis, designed to unite all Americans in common cause.

We must resolutely resist allowing post-truth politics to become the new normal and consistently demand truth-telling in our political discourse, as *Fratelli* insists.

We can improve our politics by placing the liberal individualism, so ingrained in our national psyche, in the larger context of the communal life we all share with our fellow citizens, which enables us to flourish as Francis reminds us.

Finally, we Catholics must find the most effective ways of including the teachings of Pope Francis in the national conversation on political reform, which may mean muting his explicit Christian language and translating his idealistic statements about charity back into the more traditional, pragmatic, secular language of the equal justice due to all citizens.