

Popular politics vs Populism



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The encyclical *Fratelli tutti* devotes the fifth chapter to “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good”^[1]. In line with Guardini’s polar opposition, Bergoglio had already stated, in 1989, that good politics “helps to recover the horizon of

synthesis and unity of a community: horizon of a harmonization of interests.”[2]

Politics must properly manage tensions between the particular and the common good, between personal and collective identity. It is based on social friendship, “combines love with hope and with confidence” (FT 196) and, therefore, seeks dialogue and consensus. On the contrary, populist politics is reduced to “slick marketing techniques” (FT 15), forgets the common good and uses confrontation to achieve its selfish goals.

“Lack of concern for the vulnerable can hide behind a populism that exploits them demagogically for its own purposes, or a liberalism that serves the economic interests of the powerful. In both cases, it becomes difficult to envisage an open world that makes room for everyone” (FT 155).

Aristotle had already indicated the need for social friendship to build the political community, if it is oriented towards the good of others and overcomes the emotional attachment that seeks only pleasure or utility.[3] **Indeed, good popular politics is based on social friendship, it relies on “the reserves of goodness present in human hearts” (FT 196). We need to strengthen that policy to overcome global confrontation and indifference. The Covid-19 epidemic has shown that, despite being hyper-connected, we have not been able to face the health emergency together.**

Populism

Populism is dangerous because it distorts the concept of people (FT 159), politically instrumentalizes its culture and does not try to understand what people feel and desire. In this way, it reduces them to a formless mass to be managed and exploited for one’s “own personal advantage or continuing grip on power” (FT 159).

Populist politicians nullify polar dynamism to impose their own vision. To do so, “they seek popularity by appealing to the basest and most selfish inclinations of certain sectors of the population” (FT 159). Furthermore, the use “hyperbole, extremism and polarization” as political tools (FT 15) to manipulate people and disqualify political opponents, instead of focusing on debating long-term projects that benefit society as a whole and harmoniously integrate conflicting positions.

In the face of populism, the Pope proposes a popular policy that does not eliminate polar tensions and that manages to involve intermediate associations (subsidiarity) in the construction of a shared project and a collective dream. The Pope recalls popular leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mohandas Gandhi, who truly inspire, unite, and interpret the feelings of people (FT 159), promote the common good, and protect the Earth, each in his own sphere of action.

True democracy tries to “overcome the confrontations that impede the common good” by creating a space for compromise. Popular politicians help people to understand the difficulties without closing in on themselves, but rather finding new solutions, opening up to new syntheses and welcoming diversity (FT 160).

Conclusion

We must revalue politics as public service, so that capable, honest, and generous people feel moved to dedicate themselves to it. *Fratelli tutti* invites us to recognize that politics is “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good” (FT 180). “This charity, which is the spiritual heart of politics, is always a preferential love shown to those in greatest need” (FT 187).

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[1] FT 154. These paragraphs are taken from the book: Carbajo-Núñez M., *The universal fraternity. Franciscan roots of Fratelli tutti*, Tau, Phoenix (AZ) 2023. There the reader will find a more extensive exposition and critical apparatus.

[2] Bergoglio J.M., «Necesidad de una antropología política: un problema pastoral,» in *Stromata* 45/1-2 (1989) 173-189. [Trad.].

[3] Aristotle, *Ética a Nicómaco*, Gredos, Madrid 2010, 31 (Id., *Nicomachean ethics*, Chicago UP, Chicago 2011).

◆ Tag: **Fratelli tutti**, **politica**, **populismo**
