

Political Charity and Politician's Spirituality
Adult Catechesis on *Fratelli Tutti* of Pope Francis
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A better kind of politics

Just a week after *Fratelli Tutti* was published on October 3, 2020, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo of Yangon, president of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference, wrote a letter urging all FABC bishops to read the new encyclical where “our Asian realities are echoed in [its] urgent message.” By “Asian realities” he meant the challenging cultural and political situations that Christians encounter in this part of the world. He said:

“As Catholics we may be but a minority in all countries except Philippines and Timor Leste, but the frank tone of Francis encourages us to speak strongly to all as brothers and sisters. The death penalty is still applied in eighteen of the countries of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences. The suffering of the Rohingya people is a scar on the soul of my own country, Myanmar. We feel deeply the tensions among peoples and we seek opportunities to respond to the ongoing conflicts in parts of Asia. Our hearts burn for millions who must migrate simply for their survival. We weep at the destruction of our beautiful rain forests which regenerate our sick planet and give life to our indigenous peoples.” (Gomes 2020)

Cardinal Bo could now add the more recent violence that erupted when the Myanmar military usurped power from their civilian authorities, the killings of thousands of ordinary people in the Philippines in the name of administration's war on drugs, and the many cases of corruption and conflict in the rest of the region.

All over the world, there seems to be a growing democracy gap and democratic backsliding as a number of populist leaders dominate the political scene by subverting the democratic institutions that catapulted them to power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Cf. Repucci and Slipowitz 2021). And it is in this “closed world covered with dark clouds” that Cardinal Bo wishes to amplify Pope Francis' call for “a better kind of politics”:

“Only a better kind of politics will create an open world with an open heart: politics for the common and universal good; politics for and with the people; politics that seeks human dignity; politics of women and men who practice political love; politics that integrates the economy and the social and cultural fabric into a consistent, life-giving human project.” (Gomes 2020)

The Myanmarist Cardinal has captured the spirit and wisdom of *Fratelli Tutti*, especially that off Chapter Five, which describes in compact and complex terms, Pope Francis' vision of “a better kind of politics.” There are a number of summaries and brief discussions available in print and online (e.g., Dini 2020; Vicini 2020; Rowlands 2020;

Gauthier 2020; Calleja 2020; Wejak 2020). We may, however, approach this most talked-about section by articulating the three-fold insight on the political implication of living out the Gospel message in contemporary times.

Political Charity

Christian charity must flow into politics

Pope Francis deplores the fact that politics has had a very bad reputation, but he insists that politics is essential to the task of loving and serving people both as individuals and communities.

“For many people today, politics is a distasteful word, often due to the mistakes, corruption and inefficiency of some politicians. ...There are also attempts to discredit politics, to replace it with economics or to twist it to one ideology or another...Yet can our world function without politics? Can there be an effective process of growth towards universal fraternity and social peace without a sound political life? [FT176]

But Pope Francis asks a rhetorical question: Can we really afford to shy away from politics? We cannot remain purely on the traditional ‘humanitarian’ mode of helping individuals in need. “Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses”. [FT135] Neither can we relegate the welfare of the people to the operations of the market alone. “The marketplace, by itself, cannot resolve every problem. Neoliberal approaches like “spillover” or “trickle-down” theories do not work in the real world. The resulting inequality gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society. The fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic has demonstrated that not everything can be resolved by market freedom.” A good Catholic meddles in politics. [cf. FT168]

Charity includes Good Samaritan individuals and Good Samaritan institutions

An interesting hermeneutical innovation here is Pope Francis’ powerful focus on the role of the innkeeper in his reading of the Lucan parable of the Good Samaritan. In Chapter Two, the very personal, intimate humanitarian care demonstrated by the Samaritan stranger is supplemented by the equally important service of the innkeeper.

Yes, the stranger stopped and went near the victim of violence on the roadside. The innkeeper, however, had to carry the burden of extending the initial loving rescue operation well into the prolonged, institutional service that could only be provided for by a whole social arrangement under the less affective but probably more effective management. And running this ‘inn’ demands managing space allocation, resource mobilization, financial security, transportation network, medical education, and a whole legal system on which the whole mission of effective caring rests. For this reason, charity

finds expression not only in close and intimate relationships but also in “macro relationships: social, economic and political”. [FT181]¹

Political charity learns from social science and philosophy

This papal interpretation has certainly benefitted from the contributions of social science and political philosophy. In particular, Paul Ricoeur’s (cf. Ricoeur 1965) appreciation of the role of institutional—which though less affective but could be more effective—care is expressly mentioned in the encyclical:

“Charity...unites both dimensions – the abstract and the institutional – since it calls for an effective process of historical change that embraces everything: institutions, law, technology, experience, professional expertise, scientific analysis, administrative procedures, and so forth. For that matter, “private life cannot exist unless it is protected by public order. A domestic hearth has no real warmth unless it is safeguarded by law, by a state of tranquility founded on law, and enjoys a minimum of wellbeing ensured by the division of labour, commercial exchange, social justice and political citizenship.” [FT164]

In other words, if we are sincere in caring for the wounded, the waylaid in society, we must not remain on the individual charity mode, no matter how we desire to be emotional about it. Authentic and effective love must not shy away from social transformation, including the allocation of power and participation of the people in maintaining social institutions. We need both the ethics of the good Samaritan individual and the politics of the good Samaritan Institution.

Political charity respects people and resists populist leaders

While the encyclical affirms the essential and constitutive role of politics in effecting love, it also asserts that the practice of politics must be imbued with the spirit of social fraternity and utter respect for persons imbued with dignity and utmost value. The first condition for a nobler practice of politics starts from the recognition of what it means for “persons” to be treated as “people”.

The word ‘people’ has a deeper meaning that cannot be set forth in purely logical terms. To be part of a people is to be part of a shared identity arising from social and cultural bonds. And that is not something automatic, but rather a slow, difficult process... of advancing towards a common project”. [FT158]

Valuing people allows Pope Francis to make a distinction between political leaders who are simply *popular* and those who are sadly *populist*. Both popular and populist leaders have a deep grasp of the character, the culture, the gut of their people. But they have different

¹ For a very interesting inculturated understanding of the ‘inn,’ see Joas Adiprasetya (2018). An article in // *Populo* [2021] also highlights the image of this ‘Locanda di Samaritano’ as a take off point for appreciating the link between the humanitarian work and the structural and institutional dimensions of effective charity. Interestingly, *Il Populo* also celebrates the other image—the ‘ponte’ [the bridge]—as a powerful metaphor for political love.

motivations. Popular leaders make use of their accurate insight on the strengths and weaknesses of their people for the sake of their wellbeing and growth in happiness. Populist leaders shrewdly exploit their people's culture, under whatever ideological banner, for their own personal advantage or continuing grip on power. They usurp of institutions and laws. [FT159]

Political loving demands fighting bad politics

Bad politics thrives in and drives what Pope Francis has earlier called “throw away culture.” It is a culture where “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled, ‘not yet useful’ – like the unborn, or ‘no longer needed’ – like the elderly.” It is also bad political culture when we have grown indifferent to all kinds of wastefulness, starting with the waste of food, which is deplorable in the extreme” and up to literally discarding human beings like garbage. [FT18]

A little digression might help here. Chapter Five certainly acknowledges insights coming from bishop conferences from Mexico to Polynesia, Brazil, Canada and Africa. *Fratelli Tutti* could have been enriched by a much earlier pronouncement coming from the FABC.

“Misguided and selfish power politics...has spawned structures and relationships in the political and economic community that are widening the scandalous gap between rich and poor, denying to the latter a fair and just access to the resources of the earth. Repression, oppression and exploitation are realities that result from the greed of vested economic interests and political power. Ethnic, cultural and linguistic conflicts which unleash violence, death and destruction are also linked with economic and political divisions. The political situation in many Asian countries has become volatile, and a sense of insecurity permeates particularly the minority groups.” (FABC 3.1.1)

Political love is founded on solidarity with all as sisters and brothers

At any rate, *Fratelli Tutti* has more than a mouthful to describe this bad politics. Right from the start, this social encyclical already deplores how the powerful in the world control people by spreading “despair and discouragement under the guise of defending certain virtues. And this is done by distorting language, using hyperbole, extremism and polarization as political tools. The strategy of ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism is meant to suppress alternative ideas, leaving the political and civic spaces bereft of lively debates and exchange of innovative ideas. [FT15].

In the face of this bad politics, the proper virtue for the practice of better politics is “political love” (FT183). “Recognizing that all people are our brothers and sisters, and seeking forms of social friendship that include everyone, is not merely utopian. It demands a decisive commitment to devising effective means to this end. Any effort along these lines becomes a noble exercise of charity.” Pope Francis also notes that “While individuals can help others in need, when they join together in initiating social processes

of fraternity and justice for all, they enter the “field of charity at its most vast, namely political charity”. Political love must be effective, and not just affective. This entails working for a social and political order whose soul is social charity.” [FT166] There are many things we can say about expanded form of charity. But we can highlight at least a few points.

Political loving involves protesting against abuse of power

“True love,” according to this most recent social encyclical, must entail “seeking ways to make him [the oppressor] cease his oppression.” And this must involve protest and resistance that aims at “stripping him of power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and that of others.” This stance does not discard mercy and forgiveness, but political loving is infused with that kind of that “does not entail allowing the oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing.” The Pope does not mince words when he reiterates that “Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God. [FT241]

And despite the general discipline of clerics not directly engaging in partisan politics, this teaching cannot be relegated exclusively to the laity. Pope Francis argues: “It is true that religious ministers must not engage in the party politics that are the proper domain of the laity, but neither can they renounce the political dimension of life itself, which involves a constant attention to the common good and a concern for integral human development. [FT 276]

Political charity involves commitment to the truth

It should go beyond “personal feeling” and does “not fall prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions”. Without truth, emotion lacks relational and social content. Charity’s openness to truth thus protects it from “a fideism that deprives it of its human and universal breadth”. [FT 184]

It is hard to resist the temptation to offer an interpretation that bears an appreciation of the context of Asia, particularly the Philippines. Asserting that political love must be intimately linked with the stubborn commitment to truth demands the use of all the data available for sound description and analysis of the situation. Alleviation of poverty would need stories, yes, but also statistics. Stopping the pandemic requires the hard work of scientists. Attending to the immediate emotional and financial needs of the families of the victims of extrajudicial killings is virtuous, but interrogating the source of the systematic pattern of the killings must not be dismissed as irrelevant to the practice of Christian loving. Rehabilitation of drug dependents is indeed a corporal or even spiritual work of mercy, but tracking the money trail and the masterminds of drug syndicates through social research or by documenting the testimonies of repentant perpetrators must be valued, too, as an audacious practice of political love. Doing some humanitarian good

must not be used to suppress the innate sense of duty to dig for inconvenient truth and the corresponding audacity to publicly witness to it.

Politician's Spirituality

We have talked about the practice of political charity incumbent on all Christians, but what about the politicians themselves? Pope Francis appeals for a renewed appreciation of politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good”. [FT180]. This “amore di politico” involves sacrifice and is therefore a veritable venue for a particular kind of spirituality (cf. Malnati 2020). Let me draw out from this a little catechesis on what we might call a politician's spirituality.

A counter-intuitive message: Being a politician could be a path to holiness

The politician is a person who is given the opportunity to render love that builds up the common good, the wider good, the long-lasting good. The politician is tasked and empowered not just to feed the poor, but ‘to organize and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find himself in poverty.’ “It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. [FT186]

The Pope makes this social catechesis absolutely clear: “If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity. While one person can help another by providing something to eat, the politician creates a job for that other person, and thus practices a lofty form of charity that ennobles his or her political activity.” [FT186]

The politician is given power, and is often tempted to accumulate power, but a good politician allows herself to be moved by the weak in her community. “Amid the daily concerns of political life, the smallest, the weakest, the poorest should touch our hearts: indeed, they have a ‘right’ to appeal to our heart & soul.” [194] When politicians learn how to go beyond viewing politics simply as a quest for more power, they may be sure that “none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for others.”. [FT195]

Politicians must empower the poor, not tranquilize them

“The scandal of poverty,” the Pope says, “cannot be addressed by promoting strategies of containment that only tranquilize the poor and render them tame and inoffensive.” Altruistic works must not hide within them a strategy to silence the poor and make them passive. Better politics offers the liberating fruits of education that leads to greater self-expression and participation in society. [FT183-7] in this aspect, FABC vision of participation is more expansive. For FABC, “the entire People of God is called to engage in such “politics,” for the task of infusing the Gospel and Kingdom values of love and justice into the political, economic, cultural and social world of Asia; this is an imperative of the Gospel. Participation and involvement are duties that flow from the secular implications of the Gospel and the Reign of God.” (FABC 3.1.2)

Politicians must have both strength and tenderness

While politicians are expected to be firm, bold, and decisive, they are also called to express tenderness and compassion. This is exact opposite to the “throw away” culture that Pope Francis has been fighting against since he coined that term in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. For the Pope, this teaching also includes the politicians’ recognition of their own humanity. They have their own families and personal relationships. Politicians also need rest. In the midst of their work that oftentimes reduce people to anonymity, the Pope reminds us that “loving the most insignificant of human beings as a brother, as if there were no one else in the world but him, cannot be considered a waste of time”. [FT193]

Politicians must be the first to offer sacrifice

Politicians have to learn the skill and the disposition to be able to listen to different kinds of people, and to hear their cries. This itself is a form of sacrifice. [190] When this happens, the politicians will not then think too much about their ratings in the latest public surveys nor on the number of votes they will have to earn in the next elections. The good politicians will be more concerned about finding effective solutions to “social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences: human trafficking, the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labour, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism and international organized crime.” [FT188]

Toward a spiritual retreat for politicians

The last portion of the Chapter Five sounds more like points for a spiritual retreat for those who are entrusted with leading the political community. Pope Francis, as if giving some points or delivering a homily, reminds political leaders that ‘Politics is something more noble than posturing, marketing and media spin.’ The mature politicians should cease to be asking “*How many people endorsed me?*” or “*How many voted for me?*” The Pope exhorts these wielders of power to face the “real and potentially painful, questions”: “*How much love did I put into my work?*” “*What good did I achieve in the position that was entrusted to me?*” “*What did I do for the progress of our people?*” “*What mark did I leave on the life of society?*” “*What real bonds did I create?*” “*What positive forces did I unleash?*” “*How much social peace did I sow?*” “*What positive forces did I unleash?*” [FT 197]

A Driving Force, A Daunting Test

In sum, *Fratelli Tutti*’s brand of politics is a sincere and intelligent living out of Christian charity with the special highlighting of fraternity for all must necessarily involve active engagement in politics. But this politics must in turn be better than the usual allocation of power for selfish ends. Politics must be imbued with a spirituality that pays homage to the dignity of persons, respects people in community, and works effectively for the common good. This kind of politics will have to be intimately committed to truth and the practice of tenderness, especially for the weaker ones in society. Within this paradigm, politicians are uniquely called to live a life of nobility. Together with the people entrusted

to their care, political leaders are called to find holiness precisely in their embeddedness in a career that is fraught with all kinds of dangers. All this has been and continues to be applied to Christian communities in Asia whose “realities are echoed in the urgent message” of *Fratelli Tutti*.

When this paper was being drafted, the announcement came that Manila had a new pastor, Cardinal Jose F. Advincula. In his public message a few months back, Cardinal Advincula had said that “human rights are key to church mission.” “Protecting human rights is never an option. They are at the heart of every church’s mission. The dignity of the human person is the key to social problems that beset a nation...The church cannot simply ignore human rights, because there is a moral dimension to them. The right to life, for example, is consistent with the church’s teaching that there is dignity in the human person.” “Poverty is one of the reasons why we have social problems” and that he saw education as “the way to develop the people so that they can earn more in order to live a more decent life.”

It sounds like Pope Francis has appointed a local spiritual leader who promises to embody the political love that exudes from the new social encyclical. To him and the rest of the Christian communities, especially those who are directly engaged in politics, the central thesis of *Fratelli Tutti* would be a driving force, but it could at the same time be a daunting test: “In the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, may we prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words.” [FT6]

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