A Plea for an Ethics of Citizenship: Inviting the Catholic Church to Respond to the Democratic Deficit in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: Southeast Asia is undergoing an uneven democratic recession, part of a global slide since 2006. Rights and institutional checks are eroding—evident in Myanmar's coup, Thailand's continued military tutelage, and backsliding in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte. Yet across the region many religious actors, including Catholic institutions, have been reticent or ambivalent toward public democratic engagement—constrained by repression, appeals to neutrality, or institutional self-preservation. Against this backdrop, the article traces the Catholic Church's historical movement from early skepticism to active support for democracy within its magisterium and explores how Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in its ethical teaching can more holistically respond to democratic erosion in Southeast Asia. It argues that CST provides a foundational moral framework centered on human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity, yet lacks an explicit ethics of citizenship to guide active participation in politically constrained contexts. Building on this gap, the article proposes a four-dimensional, virtue-based framework of citizenship across political, economic, cultural, and ecological life, rooted in CST's moral anthropology. It calls for a more explicit and systematic articulation of this ethic within its social teaching and pastoral formation. In doing so, the article moves beyond diagnosis to offer a theological and practical model for forming citizens capable of renewing democracy in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Keywords: Ethics of Citizenship · Democratic Recession · Catholic Social Teaching · Southeast Asia

Introduction

Current Southeast Asian scholarship richly documents Catholic democratizing agency (e.g., the Philippines and Timor-Leste) and Buddhist social

engagement,[1] yet it rarely yields a systematic, CST-anchored ethics of citizenship for plural, and often repressive, settings across the region. Recent CST scholarship has noted, contemporary accounts of citizenship often "lack the ethical dimension necessary in today's world" and remain under-specified for practice in such contexts.[2] Likewise, ecclesial and theological resources offer robust principles but stop short of a virtue-ethical, formation-to-practice framework that integrates political, economic, cultural, and ecological responsibilities and is tailored to contexts where Catholics are a minority.[3] This article responds to these lacunae by proposing a four-dimensional, CST-inspired framework of citizenship designed for Southeast Asia's plural, frequently constrained environments. By an ethics of citizenship, I mean a CST-grounded account of the virtues, practices, and institutional responsibilities that link rights to duties and orient citizens toward the common good across political, economic, cultural, and ecological fields.

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[1] See Julius Bautista, "Catholic Democratization: Religious Networks and Political Agency in the Philippines and Timor-Leste," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 2 (2020): 310–42; and Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[2] R.A.J. Steenvoorde and E.M.H. Hirsch Ballin, "Catholic Social Thought on Citizenship: No Place for Exclusion," in *In Quest of Humanity in a Globalising World* (Best: Damon, 2000), 37–58.

[3] See, for example, María Teresa Dávila, "The Political Theology of Catholic Social Teaching," in *T & T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (London: T & T Clark, 2020), 320–25; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2019); Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Journeying Together: The FABC 50 General Conference—Final Document (Bangkok Document)* (Bangkok: FABC Secretariat, 2022).

The global democratic recession forms the broader horizon of this argument. Recent years have witnessed a troubling shift toward a global "democratic recession."[4] This trend, marked by the weakening of democratic institutions, norms, and values, poses significant challenges to the stability, legitimacy, and effectiveness of democratic systems. Larry Diamond identifies three indicators of this recession: a halt in democratic expansion, a decline in freedoms, and an acceleration in breakdowns, shaped in part by the influence of authoritarian powers such as China and Russia.[5] Freedom House data confirm that since 2006 more countries have lost political rights and civil liberties than have gained them.[6] Taken together, these dynamics signal a movement away from democratic principles toward populist, authoritarian, autocratic, or hybrid regimes.[7]

The roots of the recession are complex and multifaceted, encompassing economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Economically, persistent inequality and the aftershocks of financial crises have contributed to public disillusionment with the capacity of democratic governance to ensure economic stability and

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[4] See Larry Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 24.

[5] Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective," 30.

[6] Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "Democracy under Siege," *Freedom in the World 2021* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2021), https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege [accessed on May 22, 2024].

[7] Diamond vividly captures agents of destruction of democracy as "elected political leaders, greedy for power and wealth," "military leaders," "[p]olarized parties and politicians," while contributing factors include polarization, weak institutions, external threats and internal dynamics. See Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective," 24–25, 30.

growth.[8] Politically, the rise of populist leaders has significantly intensified the deterioration of democratic norms; these leaders often exploit national emergencies, deepen social divisions, and capitalize on widespread discontent with traditional institutions to bolster their power.[9] Socially, diminishing levels of social trust and civic engagement have undermined the foundations essential for the healthy functioning of democratic societies.[10]

Culturally, shifts in value orientations and the fragility of emancipative commitments can tilt preferences toward more authoritarian options, while the strategic manipulation of information through social media (fear, force, friction) further erodes fair competition and public deliberation.[11]

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[8] See Joseph E. Stiglitz, "A Democracy in Peril," in *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 99–100.

[9] At the core of populism lies a rejection of pluralism. Populists claim that they alone represent "the people" and their true interests. See Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

[10] See James F. Keenan, SJ, "Restoring Social Trust: From Populism to Synodality," *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (March 1, 2023): 110–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221150757. Keenan builds on Francis Fukuyama's insight that trust functions as a fundamental social commodity shaping the destiny of societies. Robert D. Putnam suggests that "declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life." See Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 35.

[11] The concept of "emancipative values," as assessed by the World Values Surveys, involves measuring support for universal freedoms across about a hundred countries. This metric is composed of evaluating responses to four key themes and three related questions. These four themes include: (1) gender equality, (2) child autonomy, (3) public voice, (4) reproductive freedoms. See Christian Welzel, "Democratic Horizons: What Value Change Reveals about the Future of Democracy," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (April 20, 2021): 992–1016;

Religion, too, plays a critical yet ambivalent role in political dynamics, a factor that is often overlooked or viewed with suspicion. Religious traditions shape values, ethics, and community ties in ways that can influence governance. In some cases, religious leaders and institutions have championed democratic reforms and human rights, while in others they have supported authoritarian rulers under the banner of stability or national unity. Although no faith explicitly prescribes a particular political system, religions inform concepts of justice, authority, and the common good that underlie political life. Although many citizens hold that "religion should stay out of politics," in practice religious engagement often aims at democratization, social justice, and the common good rather than partisanship.

This global recession is particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia.[12] The region's democratic development is hampered by entrenched patronage and identity politics, polarization with middle-class ambivalence, weak horizontal checks amid executive aggrandizement and coup-prone "military guardianship," and external headwinds—most notably selective Chinese support for illiberal incumbents.[13] At the same time, Southeast

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esp. 1013-14. The idea of the "three F's" tactics in social media comes originally from Margret E. Roberts; see Joshua A. Tucker et al., "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 46–59, at 50.

[12] See Aurel Croissant and Jeffrey Haynes, "Democratic Regression in Asia: Introduction," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 1–21—which, using V-Dem, documents a net regional decline since the mid-2000s and treats Southeast Asia as a core locus of backsliding, singling out Thailand and the Philippines (with Indonesia "significant" but less severe). They also note Chinese material/ideational support for autocratic hardening in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, and Table 1 records repeated Southeast Asian episodes.

[13] Croissant and Haynes, "Democratic Regression in Asia: Introduction," 12.

Asia's export-oriented and resource-intensive growth models have generated impressive aggregate gains yet left many citizens facing precarious labor conditions informal employment and persistent inequality fueling frustration with elites and institutions. Rapid urbanization, large-scale labor migration and corruption further straining social cohesion and weakened confidence in the state's capacity to deliver inclusive development.[14] Ecologically, the region is both a global biodiversity hotspot and one of the most climate-vulnerable areas in the world: intensified typhoons and flooding, sea-level rise in low-lying delta cities, and the degradation of forest, river systems and coastal zones exacerbate existing injustices and expose the poor to disproportionate risks.[15] These intertwined political economic and ecological pressures shape the lived horizon within which citizenship is experienced and contested.

Although the late 20th century saw important advances toward democracy, recent decades have witnessed significant backsliding. Three emblematic cases such as Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines,[16] illustrate the region's contemporary challenges.

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[14] On the precarious conditions of migrant labor and its connection to governance failures in the region, see, for example, Laura Foley, "Criminality, chaos and corruption: Analyzing the narratives of labor migration dynamics in Malaysia," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 32, no. 2 (2023): 208-233.

[15] For a comprehensive regional assessment that details the specific climate vulnerabilities, see Rajesh Daniel, "Release of Major Assessment of the State of the Environment in Southeast Asia," *SEI* (2018), accessed November 11, 2025, https://www.sei.org/featured/environment-southeast-asia/.

[16] Thailand and the Philippines are emblematic of Southeast Asia's democratic regression due to lack of autonomy of civil society. See Jasmin Lorch, "Elite Capture, Civil Society and Democratic Backsliding in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines," *Democratization* 28 (2020). The most recent coup in Myanmar adds a third case to this group.

Myanmar's tentative opening collapsed with the 2021 coup, triggering nationwide repression, economic freefall, mass displacement, and a deepening humanitarian crisis;[17] Thailand's post-2014 constitutional order has preserved a façade of electoralism while entrenching military influence over core institutions;[18] and the Philippines—despite the Church-supported "People Power" transition that ousted Marcos Sr. and restored constitutional democracy—has faced renewed erosion through political dynasties, clientelism, and a punitive drug war that corroded checks and rights.[19] Other Southeast Asian polities—from Indonesia's increasingly illiberal competitive regime to Cambodia's de facto one-party rule and Timor-Leste's still-consolidating post-conflict democracy—further underscore the uneven and fragile character of democratization in the region.[20]

Across these cases, religious actors, who are crucial in strengthening civil society and external partners, have played ambivalent roles: in Buddhist-majority states, monks and lay networks have alternately reinforced state authority and mobilized for reform, while in Catholic contexts the Church has at times served as a

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[17] The 2021 coup can be considered only the 'tip of the iceberg'. For a comprehensive account on the deep-seated problems of Myanmar with democratization even before the democratic recession, see Alexander Dukalskis, "Stateness Problems or Regime Unification? Explaining Obstacles to Democratization in Burma/Myanmar," *Democratization* 16, no. 5 (September 21, 2009): 945–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340903162119.

[18] For a critical analysis of how the Thai military's influence on constitutional drafting serves to maintain its control over political structures, see Duncan McCargo, "Peopling Thailand's 2015 Draft Constitution," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no. 3 (2015): 329–54.

[19] See Bautista, "Catholic Democratization: Religious Networks and Political Agency in the Philippines and Timor-Leste."

[20] Croissant and Haynes, "Democratic Regression in Asia: Introduction," 12.

catalyst for civic mobilization;[21] demographically, Catholicism is a minority in Myanmar and Thailand but a majority in the Philippines;[22] and constitutions in Myanmar and Thailand have even disenfranchised monks and clergy—reflecting historically embedded views of religious roles in public life.[23] These contrasts highlight both the potential and the limits of religious contributions to democratic resilience in Southeast Asia and help specify the contexts in which CST-based ethics of citizenship must operate.

In light of these trends, the central claim of this article is that the Catholic Church can and should respond to Southeast Asia's democracy deficit by fostering an ethics of citizenship grounded in CST. Rather than merely commenting on social issues, CST's principles—when systematically applied to forming

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[21] See Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1996).

[22] As of 2020, the percentages of adherents of the main religions in East and Southeast Asia are as follows: Buddhists (22%), Chinese folk-religionists (20%), Christians (12%), Muslims (12%), and agnostics (22%). Myanmar's population includes approximately eight percent Christians, while in Thailand, Christians constitute about one percent. In contrast, the Philippines has a Christian majority, accounting for 91 percent of its population. See Gina A. Zurlo, "A Demographic Profile of Christianity in East and Southeast Asia," in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 4, 7, 12-13. It should be noted that, due to institutional, technological, economic and other factors, statistical data for Asia are often less updated or current compared to other parts of the world.

[23] See Tomas Larsson, "Monkish Politics in Southeast Asia: Religious Disenfranchisement in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (January 2015): 40–82; Tomas Larsson, "Buddha or the Ballot: The Buddhist Exception to Universal Suffrage in Contemporary Asia," in *Buddhism and the Political Process*, ed. Hiroko Kawanami (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 78–96, 81-82.

virtuous citizens—offer a fresh framework for strengthening democratic values across the region, even in countries where Catholics are a minority. By explicitly defining the ethical responsibilities of citizens and the Church's role in nurturing civic virtues, this approach fills a gap in CST's engagement with democracy. In doing so, the article not only critiques the democratic recession but also further enriches CST by systematically linking CST's communal principles with virtuous citizenship beyond generic civic virtue discourse. In this way, the article contributes both to academic debates on religion's role in democratization and to ecclesial discourse on how the Church can help bolster social trust, participation, and justice. To appreciate the significance of this position, it is necessary to examine the Church's complex and often contentious historical journey with democratic ideals.

The Catholic Church and the Promotion of Democratic Values: A Historical Review

Nineteenth-century Catholic political thought largely formed in reaction to the French Revolution and its naturalism, radical individualism, popular sovereignty, and strict church–state separation—developments that displaced the Church from public life and fostered a rival civil religion.[24] The response was a defensive anti-liberal posture that even aligned with monarchic forces, intensified by conflicts such as the Civil Constitution of

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[24] See Thomas C. Behr, "The Nineteenth-Century Historical and Intellectual Context of Catholic Social Teaching," in *Catholic Social Teaching: A Volume of Scholarly Essays*, edited by Gerard V. Bradley and E. Christian Brugger, 34–66, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

the Clergy and rising anticlericalism.[25] This stance reached a peak in Pius IX's *Quanta cura* and the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which condemned key liberal tenets (e.g., freedom of conscience, popular sovereignty) as "errors."[26] Theologically, these moves reveal a fear that democratization would erode ecclesial authority and thus delayed the development of a Catholic account of citizens' moral agency and responsibility within emerging democratic polities.

A turn began with Leo XIII, who reframed the Church as a spiritual authority engaging modern society.[27] In *Diuturnum illud* (1881) he allowed that political authority may be derived from the "will and decision of the multitude," while insisting that authority itself ultimately comes from God rather than majority opinion.[28] In *Rerum novarum* (1891), he simultaneously opened a second axis by focusing on labor, property, and economic organization, thus placing the conditions of work and social conflict within the field of Christian moral reflection.[29] From this point, CST no longer

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[25] Paul E. Sigmund, "The Catholic Tradition and Modern Democracy," *The Review of Politics* 49, no. 4 (1987), 535. See also Calvez and Perrin, *The Church and Social Justice: The Social Teaching of the Popes from Leo XIII to Pius XII, 1878-1958* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), 77; and William J. Fitzgerald, "The Idea of Democracy in contemporary Catholicism," *The Review of Religion,* 12, no. 2 (1948): 148-65, at 148.

[26] See, Pius IX, *Syllabus errorum* (1864), www.papal encyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm [accessed June 20, 2023]. Pius IX denounced these liberal ideas as "insanity" and "injurious babbling" in his encyclical *Quanta cura* (1864).

[27] Calvez and Perrin, *The Church and Social Justice: The Social Teaching of the Popes from Leo XIII to Pius XII, 1878-1958,* 76.

[28] Leo XIII, encyclical *Diuturnum illud* (On the Origin of Power), May 21, 1881, no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_21051881_diuturnum-illud.html [accessed February 20, 2025].

[29] Leo XIII, encyclical *Rerum novarum* (On Capital and Labor) (May 15, 1891), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-

addressed only political authority in the abstract, but also the concrete economic structures in which citizens live, work, and claim their rights—even though a full embrace of modern (Marshallian) ideas of political citizenship would come only later in the twentieth century.

During World War II, Pius XII—a "hinge pope"—prepared a postwar openness to democracy. His 1944 Christmas message championed "a genuine democracy," distinguished "people" from "masses" to avoid majoritarianism, and insisted that liberty be balanced with the common good.[30] This balance anticipates an ethics of citizenship that conjoins rights with responsibilities and treats political participation not merely as a procedural matter but as a moral vocation. At the same time, Pius XII maintained the traditional neutrality among forms of government and grounded true democracy in the natural law and in an adequate moral and religious culture. In doing so, it extends the earlier focus on authority and labor into a more explicit concern with how peoples, not just rulers or parties, exercise power.

John XXIII consolidated this shift. *Pacem in terris* (1963) linked human dignity, rights, and democratic accountability and affirmed the *right to participate* in public life—addressed to "all people of good

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xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html [accessed March 20, 2024].

    [30] Pius XII, "The Christmas Radio Message," (1944), 11-12, 20, available at https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/1944-christmas-message-8963 [accessed on March 20, 2024]. See also the commentary by John P. Langan, "The Christmas Messages of Pius XII (1939-1945): Social Teaching in a Time of Extreme Crisis", in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 183. See also Anthony Annett and Jeffrey Sachs, *Cathonomics: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a Moral Economy* (Washington, Dc: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 34.

will."[31] Vatican II then made participation a lay vocation (*Gaudium et spes* 75) and elevated religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) as a non-negotiable democratic good, inaugurating what is known as a "Catholic human rights revolution"[32] and helping to prepare the cultural soil for the "Third Wave" of democratization.[33] Subsequent post-conciliar teaching widened this horizon further: documents such as *Populorum progressio*, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, and *Centesimus annus* tied democracy to integral human development, global interdependence, and the role of culture and civil society, thereby moving beyond institutional design to the "lifeworlds" in which citizens are formed.[34]

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[31] John XXIII, encyclical *Pacem in terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty), (April 11, 1963), nos. 1-25, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html [accessed on August 20, 2023]. See also Anthony Annett, *Cathonomics: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a More Just Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 35. *Pacem in terris* no. 9 offers a robust foundation for a Christian understanding of rights based on a personalist anthropology. The encyclical's address to "all men of good will" (nos. 73–74, 166) has entered common usage as "all people of good will."

[32] George Weigel, "Catholicism and Democracy," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2001), 40.

[33] Second Vatican Council, pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, no. 75, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html [accessed May 5, 2025]. See also The Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, (Declaration on Religious Freedom, December 7, 1965), available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html [accessed on July 20, 2023].

[34] Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), Encyclical Letter, March 26, 1967; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern), Encyclical Letter, December 30, 1987; John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum), Encyclical Letter, May 1, 1991, esp. nos. 25–29, 46.

John Paul II gave this trajectory geopolitical force. In *Centesimus annus* he grounded authentic democracy in truth about the human person, participation, and the common good, insisting that while the Church does not "proselytize" democracy, if democracy means human rights, it coheres with the Church's proclamation—while warning against relativism.[35] Benedict XVI reiterated that the Church is not itself a democracy, yet it serves democracies by offering moral truth against ethical relativism.[36] Pope Francis presses for inclusive, participatory governance, warning against democratic erosion and the allure of populism and authoritarian shortcuts;[37] at the same time, in *Laudato Si'* he

[35] John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), nos. 46–47. See also Zachary R. Calo, "Catholic Social Thought and Human Rights." *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 74, no. 1 (2015): 93–112; Michael Sutton, "John Paul II's Idea of Europe," *Religion, State, and Society* 25 (March 1997): 17–30. As part of the legacy of John Paul's papacy, the Holy See has diplomatic relations with more than 190 states. See Jo Renee Formicola, "The Political Legacy of Pope John Paul II," *Journal of Church and State* 47, no. 2 (2005): 235–42, 241. See also Huntington, *The Third Wave,* 83–84.

[36] Massimo Luciani, "Concerning the Doctrine of Democracy in Benedict XVI," in *Pope Benedict XVI's Legal Thought: A Dialogue on the Foundation of Law*, ed. Andrea Simoncini and Marta Cartabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 187–204, at 189; Benedict XVI, encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love), December 25, 2005, no. 28; Benedict XVI, encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), June 29, 2009, nos. 56–61.

[37] Pope Francis, "Apostolic Journey to Cyprus and Greece: Meeting with Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps (Presidential Palace in Athens, 4 December 2021)," available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/decem ber/documents/20211204-grecia-autorita.html [accessed on April 30, 2024]; Pope Francis, "To Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See (9 January 2023)," www.vatican.va, January 9, 2023, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/ 2023/january/documents/20230109-corpo-diplomatico.html [accessed on April 30, 2024]. Francis' engagement with the term "populism" reflects this complexity: he criticizes populist movements that exploit

introduces an explicit ecological turn, arguing that care for our common home is inseparable from social justice and democratic responsibility.

Through this arc—from Pius IX's suspicion to Francis's anti-populist and ecological emphasis—the magisterium now affirms the pillars that underwrite a Catholic ethics of citizenship: the dignity of persons and their rights; the common good as a check on raw majorities; religious freedom and pluralism; and a lay vocation to participation. At the same time, the developments of CST have progressively moved from a primary focus on political authority and labor, through growing attention to culture, civil society, and global interdependence, to the ecological horizon of a threatened "common home." From this trajectory we can discern four main spheres in which civic responsibility is located, namely, political, economic, civic-cultural, and ecological. This four-dimensional structure emerges from the historical development just traced and is proposed as the most adequate way to analyze civic ethics because it gathers the main arenas in which citizenship is actually lived and contested. The next step, therefore, is to retrieve the ethical foundations of CST, so as to see how its central principles of dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, the preferential option for the poor, and the common good can normatively guide citizenship across these four spheres.

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social grievances without offering real solutions while facing accusations of populism himself for his outspoken support of marginalized groups. See William McCormick, "The Populist Pope?: Politics, Religion, and Pope Francis," *Politics and Religion*, 14 (2020): 159-181, 171.

The Ethical Foundations of Catholic Social Teaching

Building upon its historical engagement with democracy and justice, CST articulates a set of foundational principles that define Christian social responsibility. These principles do not merely offer a moral vocabulary—they serve as the normative criteria by which Catholics and thus also 'all people of good will,' are invited to assess political and civic life. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* affirms:

> The permanent principles […] constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of the human person, [...] the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity. These principles [are] the expression of the whole truth about [human beings] known by reason and faith...[38]

To these four,[39] a fifth principle has become indispensable in contemporary applications of CST: the preferential option for the poor. Together, these five pillars form an integrated framework that supports a relational, justice-

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[38] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 160, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html [accessed on May 20, 2024].

[39] Several CST specialists deduce additional principles from these ethical pillars. See, for example, Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 115–64; for a recent study, see María Teresa Dávila, "The Political Theology of Catholic Social Teaching," in *T & T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (London: T & T Clark, 2020), 320–25.

oriented, and participatory vision of citizenship and social life.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is the cornerstone of all CST. Every person possesses inherent worth as *imago Dei*—created in the image of God—a conviction strongly affirmed by the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et spes*)[40] and deepened by John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae*: "every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church's very heart."[41] In political terms, this means that citizenship must be organized around the protection of human persons, especially the vulnerable, and that any social or legal order that undermines human dignity is, by definition, ethically deficient.

The Common Good

The common good refers to "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."[42] This vision extends to a "universal common good" that reflects growing interdependence among peoples and nations.[43] Benedict XVI insists that

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[40] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12.

[41] John Paul II, encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life), March 25, 1995, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19950325_evangelium-vitae.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

[42] *Gaudium et spes*, no. 26.

[43] *Pacem in terris*, no. 100. David Hollenbach, drawing on Cicero's idea of the common good (*res publica*), argues that a true republic hinges on a shared commitment to the common good, which he defines as a collective endeavor towards justice and communal benefit. See David Hollenbach, "Recovering the Commonweal," in *The Common*

striving for the common good is both a requirement of justice and an act of charity—rejecting individualism in favor of collective flourishing.[44] For an ethics of citizenship, the common good provides the horizon against which individual rights are balanced and civic duties discerned, calling citizens to look beyond private interests towards shared social aims.

Solidarity

Solidarity is the moral and social commitment to the well-being of others, especially the most vulnerable. It is a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."[45] Francis emphasized that solidarity (fraternity) is "more necessary than ever" in a world marked by fragmentation and inequality.[46] For citizens, solidarity translates into a duty to support the marginalized and to work collectively for social justice, reshaping citizenship from a merely legal status into a practice of mutual responsibility and shared belonging.

Good and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 65-86.

[44] Benedict XVI, encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (Charity in Truth), June 29, 2009, no. 7, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

[45] John Paul II, encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern), December 30, 1987, nos. 38–40, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_19871230_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

[46] Francis, encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), October 3, 2020, nos. 116–18, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html [accessed May 5, 2025]; Francis, apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), November 24, 2013, no. 188, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity holds that "it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community."[47] This principle defends local autonomy, safeguards personal initiative, and prevents undue centralization. It affirms that decisions should be made at the most immediate level possible, fostering active participation and self-governance from the grassroots upward. In practice, subsidiarity argues for empowering citizens and local communities to solve problems, limiting top-down interventions to a supportive role, and thereby countering both authoritarianism and passive dependence on state structures.

Preferential Option for the Poor

The preferential option for the poor has become a defining feature of modern CST, with roots in the tradition and prominence since *Populorum progressio* (1967),[48] and liberation theology.[49] It obliges citizens and governments to prioritize the most vulnerable in decision-making, ensuring that social, economic, and political arrangements are judged first from the standpoint of those who suffer exclusion and

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[47] Pius XI, encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (On the Reconstruction of the Social Order), May 15, 1931, no. 79, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

[48] Paul VI, encyclical *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples), March 26, 1967, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

[49] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 36.

deprivation. This option is not a call to partially in favor of one group, but a criterion for evaluating whether a society is genuinely just.

At the regional level, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has contextualized these core principles of CST within the diverse socio-political landscapes of Asia,[50] urging a renewed commitment to social justice, peace-building, and interfaith harmony and thus calling the Church to be a "bridge-builder."[51]

In this light, these five principles cohere into an ethical vision that reframes citizenship into a moral vocation ordered to justice, participatory engagement, and care for the vulnerable.[52] This framework now grounds a four-dimensional account of ethical citizenship, namely, political, economic, cultural, and ecological forms, each translating foundational principles into concrete practices.

Articulating an Ethics of Citizenship

In contemporary political theory, "citizenship" is often understood in three interrelated ways: as a legal status with specific civil, political, and social rights; as an ideal of political agency and participation grounded in duties towards the community; and as a set of competencies or dispositions formed through social-ization and education, which enable citizens to translate their rights into effective democratic practice.[53] Taken

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[50] Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Journeying Together: The FABC 50 General Conference – Final Document (Bangkok Document)* (Bangkok: FABC, 2022), 1–2.

[51] See *FABC Papers No. 63* (Hong Kong: FABC Secretariat, 1992), 21–25.

[52] Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *Journeying Together,* 28–33, 55, 58.

[53] See Alexander Unser, "Introduction: Religion, Democracy and Citizenship," in *Religion, Citizenship and Democracy*, ed. Alexander

together, these dimensions already suggest that citizenship cannot be reduced to a passive possession of rights or a merely juridical bond to the state, but points towards a normative ideal of how persons ought to live together in political community.

It is precisely this normative dimension that an 'ethics of citizenship' seeks to name and deepen. An ethics of citizenship identifies the principles and values that guide how citizens exercise their rights and shoulder their duties within society. Good citizenship exceeds rule-compliance or episodic voting; it entails active participation in public life and a lived commitment to the common good. As the U.S. Catholic bishops put it, "the virtues of good citizenship require a lively sense of participation in the commonwealth and of having obligations as well as rights within it."[54]

Building on this understanding, and on CST's insistence that authentic democracy must rest on moral truth and solidarity with the most vulnerable, this article argues for and adopts a four-field map for an ethics of citizenship. This map is constructed from, rather than merely borrowed from, CST's own architecture of social life. These four fields are: (1) the political sphere (public authority, rights, and participation), (2) the economic sphere (work, property, production, exchange), (3) the civic-cultural sphere (families, religions, schools, media, associations— i.e., civil society where belonging and identity are formed), and (4) the ecological commons (the

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Unser, Religion and Human Rights 8 (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021), 2. See also Robert Jackson, "Citizenship, Religious and Cultural Diversity and Education," in *International Perspectives on Citizenship, Education and Religious Diversity*, ed. Robert Jackson (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–28.

[54] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986), no. 1.

natural and built environments that condition all other spheres).[55] This four-dimensional structure reflects the historical trajectory sketched above: CST has moved from an initial focus on political authority and labor to an expanded concern for culture, civil society, global interdependence, and the ecological horizon of our "common home" in *Laudato Si'*. Because it gathers the main arenas in which citizenship is lived and contested, it provides a fitting lens for analyzing civic ethics. The first two fields (politics, economics) are classical domains; the civic-cultural field explicitly names civil society as the mediating "lifeworld" consistent with subsidiarity and the subjectivity of society; the ecological field names the pre-political and pre-economic conditions for common life.[56] Culture and ecology are indeed cross-cutting: culture pervades institutions and markets (shaping imagination, trust, and norms), while ecological limits and duties bound and orient political and economic choices.[57] In contrast to accounts of citizenship that remain narrowly legal or politically focused, this configuration responds to the identified gap in CST-related scholarship by offering an integrated, practice-

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[55] *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 53–62 (culture) and 73–76 (political community and participation); Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), nos. 164–191 (common good, participation, subsidiarity, civil society); John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), nos. 11, 46–49 (economy; civil society's "subjectivity"); Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), nos. 137–162 ("integral ecology").

[56] *Compendium*, nos. 185–191 (subsidiarity; intermediate associations); Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), no. 79 (limits on state absorption of lower bodies); John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, no. 46 (civil society as social subject).

[57] Francis, *Laudato Si'*, nos. 139, 156, 160–162 (ecology as social and moral horizon). See also Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (2009), no. 51 (environment and intergenerational justice), and Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967), no. 14 (integral human development).

oriented horizon for civic virtue. In what follows, we derive citizen-level duties by intersecting CST's core principles, namely, human dignity, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor, with each field, showing how a practice-oriented ethics of citizenship can strengthen democratic life in Southeast Asia.

Political Citizenship

The political dimension of citizenship centers on the relationship between individuals and the state, and on their active participation in shaping public life. Beyond mere civil status, this includes rights such as voting, free expression, and peaceful assembly, as well as corresponding duties to promote justice, protect the vulnerable, and uphold the common good.[58] Classic theories of citizenship, like that of T.H. Marshall, emphasized the progressive extension of civil and political rights to all members of society,[59] but tended to cast citizens as passive bearers of those rights. In contrast, an ethics of political citizenship stresses active participation and civic virtue. Citizens are called to take responsibility for their community by staying informed, voting conscientiously, serving in public office or civic roles when able, and holding authorities accountable to the common good. The health of a democracy depends on this active engagement, which ensures that the government truly reflects the will and needs of the people.[60]

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[58] T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 28–29.

[59] Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, 36–37.

[60] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2019), no. 13.

Ethically, as emphasized in *Pacem in terris*, political citizenship also requires a commitment to justice, equality, and the common good in the public sphere of a well-ordered society.[61] Laws and institutions should uphold fundamental human dignity and protect the vulnerable rather than merely entrenching the power of the strong. This means that citizens and leaders alike must consider how policies affect the whole community, especially marginalized groups, and strive to create conditions under which everyone can flourish. An important aspect of this ethical outlook is the recognition that rights come with responsibilities: for example, the freedom of speech carries the responsibility to engage in civil discourse in an honest way, and the right to vote comes with the duty to consider in a responsible way the public interest. This echoes John XXIII's vision in *Pacem in terris*, where the exercise of rights is always bound by a moral obligation to others and to society as a whole.

Furthermore, the structure of political life itself has ethical implications. A just political community not only grants formal rights but also empowers people to exercise them effectively. Here the principle of subsidiarity is instructive: decisions should be made at the lowest level competent to handle an issue, so that local communities and associations can participate directly in solving their own problems whenever possible.[62] Higher levels of authority (such as the national government) should step in only to support or coordinate these lower units, when necessary, rather than usurping their functions. This approach respects the pluralism of society and fosters a sense of ownership and agency among citizens. Closely related to subsidiarity is the principle of solidarity, which in the political context means understanding society as a cooperative venture in which each member shares

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[61] *Pacem in terris*, nos. 26–28.
[62] *Quadragesimo anno*, no. 79.

responsibility for the welfare of all.[63] Solidarity calls both citizens and the state to prioritize the common good and to ensure that no group is excluded from the political community. Thus, an ethics of political citizenship combines vigorous individual participation with an overarching obligation to build just and inclusive institutions.

Economic Citizenship

Beyond the political arena, citizenship has an economic dimension concerned with the material conditions of life and the distribution of resources. Economic citizenship refers to the bundle of social and economic rights and duties that enable individuals to attain a dignified livelihood and to participate fully in society's economic life.[64] CST, especially since *Mater et magistra* (1961) and *Populorum progressio* (1967), recognized that political rights alone are insufficient if citizens lack basic means; thus, social rights—such as the rights to education, healthcare, social security, and a minimum standard of income—are considered essential components of full citizenship.[65] An ethics of citizenship insists that all members of society should have access to these necessities. This entails a collective responsibility to combat poverty and inequality, ensuring that no citizen is relegated to second-class status by economic exclusion.

In this dimension, solidarity takes the form of socioeconomic solidarity: ethical economic citizenship

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[63] *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38.

[64] *Rerum novarum*, no. 23; *Pacem in terris*, no. 11.

[65] *Pacem in terris*, nos. 11-12. John XXIII enumerates the civil, political, social, and economic rights (to food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and the right to work) that together ensure a dignified life and full participation in society.

involves fostering solidarity between those who prosper and those who struggle. The well-off have a moral duty to support social safety nets and policies that uplift the less fortunate, while society as a whole should encourage the empowerment of the poor. In CST, this ethic is encapsulated in the preferential option for the poor, which mandates that the needs of the most vulnerable take priority in economic decision-making.[66] Social programs, labor laws, and market regulations should be evaluated by how they impact those living in poverty, aiming always to protect human dignity. Importantly, solidarity in economic life is not a one-way street: it is not enough for the state or charitable institutions simply to dispense aid from above.[67] Justice requires enabling and inviting marginalized groups to become active participants in improving their own situation, rather than leaving them as passive recipients of charity.[68] In practical terms, this might mean investing in education, job training, and community development initiatives that allow people to lift themselves out of poverty with dignity.

Additionally, ethical economic citizenship respects certain fundamental economic rights. One is the right to meaningful work—the opportunity to earn a living through one's talents and effort. Another is the right to own property. However, these rights are not absolute and unbounded; they are balanced by social responsibilities. Ownership carries a "social mortgage," meaning property and wealth ought to be used in ways that serve the common good and do not harm others.[69] A society guided

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[66] *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 42; *Compendium*, no. 186.

[67] *The Compendium* no. 186.

[68] See Donal Dorr, "Can Anything Good Come from Nazareth? Option for the Poor Revisited," in *Whose Ethics? Which Priorities? Catholic Social Thought in Transition* (Cambridge: Von Hügel Institute, 1999), 4.

[69] John Paul II, encyclical *Centesimus annus* (On the Hundredth Year), May 1, 1991, no. 46, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-

by an ethics of citizenship will seek to create economic structures that reward initiative and hard work while also providing safeguards so that no one is left destitute. In sum, the economic dimension of citizenship demands solidarity across class lines and thoughtful policies that promote both equity and initiative, ensuring that every person can contribute to and share in the prosperity of the community. Thus, economic citizenship—as shaped by CST—demands not only structural justice but also a culture of economic solidarity that empowers the poor as agents of their own flourishing.

Cultural Citizenship

While often overlooked in political discourse, the cultural dimension of citizenship is vital in pluralistic societies like those in Southeast Asia, where ethnic and religious diversity is profound. Cultural citizenship refers to the recognition, inclusion, and participation of individuals as members of cultural communities within the broader society.[70] Whereas civil-political and socio-economic citizenship address formal rights and material well-being, cultural citizenship is about belonging and identity—it includes the claim to maintain one's language, traditions, and way of life, and to be respected as an equal member of the national community

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ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html [accessed May 5, 2025]; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 67; Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 162.

[70] See Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *Handbook of Citizenship Studies* (London: Sage, 2002), 153–54. See also, for the widely cited formulation of cultural citizenship as belonging and equality of standing, Renato Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 402–11.

regardless of one's cultural background.[71] In a pluralistic society, citizens come from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional groups. An ethics of cultural citizenship thus demands a framework of mutual respect and dialogue across differences. Every citizen should be able to bring their heritage into a shared civic identity without discrimination or coerced assimilation; conversely, citizens have the responsibility to respect others' diversity, counter prejudice, and cultivate common ground.

Fostering cultural citizenship ethically means ensuring that minority groups and marginalized cultures have a genuine voice in the public sphere. This can involve inclusive policies—such as multilingual education, legal accommodation for religious practices, or support for cultural institutions—that affirm the presence and contributions of those communities.[72] It also involves informal practices of listening and engagement among citizens. No group should be made to

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[71] For a discussion on minority cultural/linguistic rights within liberal citizenship, see Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, eds., *Citizenship in Diverse Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–6. See also T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950) on classic civil–political–social triad that frames the "political/economic" contrast.

[72] Among the issues of cultural inclusion in Southeast Asia, the question of Burmanization receives much scholarly attention. It means the perceived religio-ethnic homogenization of Burman majority against the 134 other ethnic groups in Myanmar. The *Tatmadaw* government of Myanmar tries to systematize Burman superiority in culture, education system, governmental recruitment, and religiosity. The nationalist Ma Ba Tha, led prominently by the Buddhist nationalist monk U Wirathu, is known for fueling Islamophobic sentiments. The Rohingyas are reportedly the most discriminated Bengali-speaking Muslim minorities. A similar case is that of discriminated Chinese ethnic minority groups in different pockets of Southeast Asia. See Pum Za Mang, "Christianity, Colonialism, and Burmanization," *The Expository Times*, 134, no. 4 (2022), 153-163.

feel like outsiders in their own homeland. As CST emphasizes, giving minorities and the excluded a genuine voice in society is a key aspect of true citizenship.[73] This principle urges both governments and civil society to actively include those at society's margins—whether they are racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., the Rohingya in Myanmar), indigenous peoples, immigrants, or other marginalized groups—in deliberations about the common good. Practical measures might range from inclusive representation in political decision-making bodies to public recognition of diverse cultural holidays and narratives in national history.

Another element of cultural citizenship is the role of 'intermediary associations' (churches, neighborhood groups, unions, cultural clubs) in mediating between individuals and the state. People often experience citizenship not only as individuals, but also through these communities, which provide identity, solidarity, and the skills of participation. In the Catholic view, such intermediate associations are essential to a healthy social order and should be respected according to the principle of subsidiarity.[74] Ethically, nurturing these communal spaces supports cultural citizenship by enabling pluralism to thrive without fragmenting society. The state, in turn, has an obligation to respect and, when appropriate, partner with these communities rather than suppress them, so long as they operate within the bounds of justice and human rights.[75]

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[73] For political community and participation, see *Gaudium et spes,* 73-76. See also, GS, 53-62, for the cultural grounding.

[74] *The Compendium*, no. 189.

[75] Classical statement of subsidiarity: higher orders should not absorb the functions of lower bodies, see *Quadragesimo anno*, 79. See also *Centesimus annus,* 46 on the subjectivity of society and civil society's primacy.

In sum, cultural citizenship extends equality to the realm of culture and identity. Full membership in society is not only a matter of legal status or economic integration but also of being culturally visible, esteemed and heard. In an era of intense mobility and interdependence, upholding an ethics of cultural citizenship is crucial for social cohesion: it mitigates the tensions arising from diversity by promoting an inclusive national narrative that recognizes differences yet weaves them into a common tapestry of civic belonging.

Ecological Citizenship

The fourth dimension is increasingly emphasized in CST, particularly in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si',* which expands the moral imagination of citizenship to include our relationship with creation. "In the encyclical, Francis states, "Everything is interconnected," highlighting that the ethical responsibilities of citizenship extend to our shared planet."[76] Ecological citizenship expands the scope of moral concern beyond human society to include the natural environment that sustains life. It arises from the recognition that issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution create ethical obligations for citizens, not just governments.[77] In essence, ecological citizenship holds that each person, as a citizen of the earth, shares responsibility for the health of the planet. This means that the rights we claim—such as the right to clean air, clean water, and a livable climate—must be coupled with duties to reduce our environmental impact and to protect

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[76] *Laudato Si',* 138.

[77] Francis, encyclical *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home), May 24, 2015, nos. 51, 67, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html [accessed May 5, 2025].

the Earth's ecosystems for future generations.[78] Unlike traditional notions of citizenship, which are tied to a particular nation-state, ecological citizenship is inherently transnational. Environmental problems transcend political borders, so the ethical community of concern must also be global.

Practicing ecological citizenship involves both personal and collective actions. On the personal level, it may entail lifestyle choices that reflect environmental conscience: conserving energy, recycling, limiting one's carbon footprint, and advocating for sustainable practices in one's community. On the collective level, ecological citizenship calls for active participation in environmental decision-making and movements—citizens might support policies for renewable energy, join campaigns to preserve forests and wildlife, or collaborate in international efforts to address climate change. There is also an element of intergenerational justice: current citizens have obligations to those who will come after us. This implies supporting sustainable development today so that future generations inherit a world in which they too can exercise their rights and citizenship fully.

Solidarity in this context extends to the whole of creation. Just as ethical citizenship in other dimensions urges care for all members of the human community, ecological citizenship urges care for the community of life on Earth. From the perspective of CST, the notion of citizenship ultimately spans beyond national boundaries: individuals are called to assume responsibility as members of a universal human family, effectively as "world citizens" mindful of the planet and the human family as a whole.[79] In this view, concern for the environment is part of living out the duty of solidarity

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[78] *Laudato Si'*, 67.

[79] Ballin and Steenvoorde, "Catholic Social Thought on Citizenship: No Place for Exclusion," 19.

with both one's neighbors and distant strangers, since environmental harm often affects the poor and vulnerable most severely. The principle of the common good, long central to ethics and Catholic teaching, here takes on a global ecological dimension—protecting the common good means safeguarding the conditions for life on Earth itself.

Incorporating the ecological dimension into citizenship ethics challenges us to rethink traditional civic virtues. It suggests that virtues like prudence, temperance, and responsibility gain new relevance in how we consume and interact with nature. Citizens are asked to balance their immediate interests with the long-term sustainability of their community's natural habitat. Ultimately, ecological citizenship enriches the concept of what it means to be a citizen: it adds an ethic of environmental stewardship to the political, economic, and cultural responsibilities of citizenship. By acknowledging our interdependence with the natural world, this dimension calls for a form of moral patriotism not just toward one's country, but toward the Earth itself – 'our common home' and the inheritance of future generations.

The Church as Catalyst: Advancing the Ethics of Citizenship in Southeast Asia

Having traced the Church's gradual embrace of democratic values and articulated four dimensions of ethical citizenship, the final task is to translate these principles into concrete practices. To respond effectively to the deepening democracy deficit in Southeast Asia, the Catholic Church must evolve from a teacher of moral principles to a credible agent of civic transformation. Grounded in its social doctrine and drawing on its legacy of public witness—most notably in the People Power movement in the Philippines—the Church possesses both

the spiritual authority and institutional resources to nurture an ethics of citizenship across the region. In other words, the Church must now move from reflection to implementation. Having outlined the ethical dimensions of citizenship, the question becomes how these ideals can be actualized. The Catholic Church, with its grassroots presence and moral influence, is well-positioned to translate CST principles into civic action on the ground.

Five ecclesial strategies are proposed for this task:

Political Literacy: Catholic educational institutions—schools, universities, seminaries, and catechetical programs—can be mobilized to cultivate ethically formed, democratically engaged citizens. Civic education grounded in CST can promote the dignity of the person, the common good, and responsible participation, particularly in societies where public education is weak or ideologically constrained. For example, Catholic schools and universities might integrate modules on citizens' rights, social responsibility, and critical thinking into their curricula, or host non-partisan voter education initiatives inspired by CST's emphasis on conscience and the common good. This strategy primarily corresponds to the political dimension and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity.

Empowerment of the Laity: Given legal and constitutional restrictions on clergy participation in politics in countries like Myanmar and Thailand, the Church must invest in forming lay leaders—especially youth and professionals—for public service and civic advocacy. Parishes and dioceses can facilitate this through theological-political formation, training in

ethical leadership, and the creation of lay-led civic platforms aligned with CST. This includes encouraging capable Catholic professionals and young people to assume roles in public office or civil society, supported by Church-run leadership programs. By empowering laypeople to take initiative in political and social life, the Church honors the principle of subsidiarity and amplifies moral leadership in arenas where clergy cannot directly intervene. This strategy underscores the preferential option for the poor by ensuring that lay Catholics—including women, youth, and marginalized groups—can participate in public life and influence political, economic, cultural, and ecological decision-making.

Interreligious Collaboration: In a region marked by religious pluralism and intercommunal tensions, the Church must proactively engage with other faith communities to defend democratic norms and protect religious freedoms. Interreligious forums and joint initiatives can offer a powerful witness to shared ethical commitments, especially where religious minorities are at risk of exclusion or violence. For instance, Catholic bishops and Muslim or Buddhist leaders might issue joint statements defending free and fair elections, or organize interfaith dialogues on human rights and peace. Such collaboration, rooted in CST's principle of solidarity, demonstrates that fundamental democratic values and human dignity are concerns shared across religions, building a united front against authoritarianism. This not only answers the cultural dimension but also reflects CST's call for solidarity and the common good, showing that citizenship transcends confessional boundaries.

Prophetic Witness: In repressive contexts, the Church must exercise moral courage by publicly denouncing corruption, injustice, and authoritarianism.

This witness includes symbolic and pastoral actions—public liturgies, advocacy campaigns, and letters of moral exhortation—as well as solidarity with marginalized groups. Such actions follow in the footsteps of ecclesial leaders like Cardinal Jaime Sin, whose leadership catalyzed democratic transition. In practice, this prophetic stance may involve bishops' conferences issuing pastoral letters against state violence or corruption (as the Philippine bishops did in the face of extrajudicial killings), or priests and religious standing with protesters demanding justice. Though speaking out can invite reprisals, it continues the biblical tradition of speaking truth to power and can rouse the conscience of the wider public.

Internal Reform: To credibly advocate for ethical citizenship, the Church must embody these values internally. While not a democracy, the Church can model transparency, subsidiarity, participation, and account-ability—especially through synodal structures, lay consultation, and institutional responsiveness. Such internal coherence strengthens its moral credibility and aligns institutional practice with the vision it proclaims. Pope Francis's ongoing synodal reforms exemplify this approach: by encouraging open dialogue, accountability, and lay participation within Church governance, the hierarchy begins to model the democratic virtues it preaches. Concrete steps such as financial transparency, empowering parish and diocesan pastoral councils, and a zero-tolerance stance on abuses of power or corruption within Church institutions all help put the Church's own house in order. By living its principles internally, the Church bolsters its credibility to call civil society and governments to higher standards. Internal reform ensures that the Church's own structures reflect the

justice and participation it advocates externally; in CST terms, it embodies subsidiarity and accountability.

Taken together, and aligned with the four dimensions and CST principles, these initiatives form a coherent approach: by educating, empowering, collaborating, prophetically witnessing, and reforming itself, the Church translates the ethics of citizenship into practice. Each strategy reinforces the others; for example, political literacy supports laity empowerment, while prophetic witness and interreligious collaboration cultivate the solidarity needed for cultural and ecological citizenship. In combination, these five strategies strengthen one another and exemplify how CST principles can be actively lived out to foster democratic values.

Conclusion: Citizenship as a Vocation and Ecclesial Responsibility

Bringing together the historical evolution, the four-dimensional ethical framework, and the Church's practical strategies, the four dimensions of political, economic, cultural, and ecological citizenship collectively articulate a comprehensive ethical vision for contemporary civic life. Each dimension addresses a distinct arena of moral concern, yet all are interrelated: civic participation is undermined by poverty; cultural inclusion is meaningless without political rights; and economic development that neglects environmental sustainability is ethically untenable. Together, they form a mutually reinforcing framework grounded in human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good.

In an era marked by rising authoritarianism, systemic inequality, cultural fragmentation, and ecological degradation, such an integrative ethics of citizenship is urgently needed. Citizens today are increasingly called to navigate and respond to transnational crises—migration,

globalized markets, religious polarization, and climate collapse—that demand multifaceted civic engagement. A narrowly legal or nationalistic conception of citizenship is insufficient. What is required is a morally enriched understanding of citizenship as an ethical vocation—an active commitment to justice, compassion, and the flourishing of the human and ecological community.

The Catholic Church has both the capacity and the responsibility to contribute to this moral renewal. By integrating the ethics of citizenship more explicitly and systematically into its social teaching and ecclesial practice, and by equipping the faithful to act as agents of democratic transformation, the Church in Southeast Asia can help rebuild civic life from the ground up. It can form citizens who are not only faithful but also just, informed, and engaged—citizens who live out their baptismal call in service to the common good. In this way, the Church becomes not only a voice of moral authority but also a catalyst of hope in societies struggling for democracy, dignity, and peace.

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