MST Review

A semi-annual peer-reviewed international printed and electronic journal (mstreview.com) of CICM-Maryhill School of Theology, Quezon City, Philippines. It serves as a venue for the discussion of contemporary issues in theological, biblical, philosophical, historical, cultural, missiological, and pastoral studies—issues that concern researchers/scholars, professors, theology students, professional ministers, and pastoral/church workers.

About this Issue: The Ongoing Need for Liberation as the Jubilee Year 2025 passes

In commemoration of the Jubilee Year 2025, Pope Francis published the papal bull *Spes non confundit* on 9 May 2024. Taking inspiration from Paul's letter to the Romans 5:5, the papal bull reminds the faithful to become "pilgrims of hope" amidst the various crises happening in the world today. In this regard, Pope Francis sees how Christian love is being tested with patience for a better future, thus reinvigorating the theological virtue of hope. The papal bull highlights "the tragedy of war", "*the loss of the desire to transmit life*", and the need to establish "*a social covenant to support and foster hope*" for prisoners, the sick, the youth, migrants, exiles, displaced persons and refugees, the elderly, and the poor, and the unjust "ecological debt" between the Global North and Global South as key issues that require immediate response (*SNC* n. 7-16). These matters reveal the different faces of the marginalized who are struggling in a world that is increasingly filled with uncertainties, hardships, and violence, making peace an elusive goal to achieve.

Rooted in the biblical custom of sanctifying the 50th year through debt cancellation, freeing the captives, and return of property to its original owners (Lev 25:8-54), the Christian practice of the Jubilee Year was first instituted by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300, calling it a Holy Year of pilgrimage, grace, reconciliation, and forgiveness (*SNC* n. 5). The economic terms of debt and redemption are intrinsically linked to the theological expressions of sin and forgiveness. While a naive dualistic mindset views a rigid material-spiritual distinction between these fields, a holistic understanding of the Jubilee Year demonstrates the integral restoration of one's relationship with God and fellow neighbor. This biblical

practice allows the world to rest by cancelling encumbering legal obligations. It resets the once broken relationships as part of the whole divine economy. The Jubilee Year is thus the *kairos* of God's mercy for it institutionalizes redemption from debt and forgiveness of sins.

The Jubilee Year is a call for social justice. When Pope John Paul II proclaimed the Great Jubilee Year 2000 through the papal bull *Incarnationis mysterium* on 29 November 1998, he called the attention of global financial institutions to provide debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC). Thanks to Paul Vallely's advocacy as early as 1990, the practice of debt cancellation gained widespread support, later aligning it with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.[1] It benefited heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC), mostly from Africa, through debt restructuring. Despite these efforts, emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs) have rapidly accumulated large and broad amounts of debt, leading to what economists describe as the "fourth wave" of debt since 2010.[2] Although Pope Francis reiterates the call for debt cancellation, the 'globalization of indifference' epitomized by the neo-liberal economic system's prioritization of the private over the commons shows the immediate necessity to push for global financial and structural reforms. Until these changes happen, the cycle of indebtedness among poor countries, thus poverty, will remain.

Referencing the Jubilee Year's practice of debt cancellation, Jeffrey Sachs wrote in 2005, "Today, we can invoke the same logic to declare that extreme poverty can

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[1] Paul Vallely, *Bad Samaritans: First World Ethics and Third World Debt* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990).

[2] M. Ayhan Kose, Peter Nagle, Franziska Onhsorge, and Naotaka Sugawara, *Global Waves of Debt: Causes and Consequences* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 2021), 149-167.

be ended not in the time of our grandchildren, but in *our time*. The wealth of the rich world, the power of today's vast storehouses of knowledge, and the declining fraction of the world that needs help to escape from poverty all make the end of poverty a realistic possibility by the year 2025."[3] The vision to eradicate poverty has been programmatically incorporated into the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are set to be achieved by 2030. However, geopolitical tensions, especially in recent years, have created an environment that is unconducive to promoting cooperation and mutual prosperity. This dire situation has thus put the full realization of the UN SDGs in jeopardy.

This cycle of financial indebtedness is mirrored by a moral indebtedness to the military-industrial complex, as evidenced by the record-high $2.7 trillion in global military spending according to a UN report.[4] Populist governments have reinforced a climate of fear through the politics of national security. In addition to ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and Congo, Venezuela and Iran have emerged as new sites of military flashpoints and civil unrest. In the United States, the Trump administration has galvanized its Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to deport undocumented immigrants, sparking mass protests and violence that have even affected American citizens. These events reflect the global erosion of liberal democracy, raising questions about whether the State, as a political body, can continue to guarantee human rights, freedom, justice, and peace.

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[3] Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Time* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 3.

[4] United Nations, *The Security We Need: Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future,* Report of the Secretary-General (New York: United Nations, 2025), 6.

Having stated the tumultuous global situation during the Jubilee Year 2025, the five articles of *MST Review* 27, no. 2 reflect on the social and ethical themes of community resistance to extractivism through integral ecology, God's favor in the poor, the dynamics of synodality, the ethical dimensions of divorce and marital relations, and democratic citizenship.

First, Alvenio G. Mozol Jr.'s *Extractivism and Survival: Community Resistance through Integral Ecology* discusses how extractivism has destroyed local communities to become 'sacrifice zones' in the name of profit through slow violence. Following Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework, Mozol's study analyzes the multi-systemic impact of corporate exploitation of nature, ranging from the deep-microsystem of a person (tissues, cells, biochemistry, psychology), which is intertwined with the microsystem of the family (domestic relations, interactions), the community mesosystem (places and contacts away from home), the institutional exosystems (social structures and institutions), the broad cultural macrosystem (overarching cultural values, economic systems, and ideological frameworks), and the long-term chronosystems. Apart from citing concrete examples of devastating mining practices from the Philippines, Colombia, and Ecuador, the paper demonstrates how grassroots communities become conscienticized by organizing collective resistance against environmentally destructive corporations and government policies. Inspired by Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, Mozol's paper thus demonstrates how community resistance is reinforced through integral ecology as a framework for fighting extractivism's systemic violence to transform sacrifice zones into sites of renewal.

Second, Joenel Buencibello's article, *The Mystery of Divine Predilection and the Preferential Option for the Poor in Matthew 20:1-16*, examines how God's favor for

the poor is articulated in the biblical parable of the workers in the vineyard. The study places this scriptural theme in dialogue with two distinct theological frameworks: Thomistic scholastic theology, grounded in metaphysical reflection on divine predilection, and liberation theology, rooted in socio-political and historical praxis through preferential option for the poor. By comparing these approaches, Buencibello demonstrates that God's love for the poor is neither arbitrary nor unjust but a manifestation of divine generosity that transcends human calculations of merit. Despite the apparent ambiguity of the Gospel narrative, the article argues that divine predilection ultimately serves justice by affirming God's freedom to bestow grace in ways that uphold both compassion and equity.

Third, Wilfried Vanhoutte's research, *Nicholas of Cusa on Peace of Faith: A Foundational Framework for Synodality?*, explores the relevance of Nicholas of Cusa's key philosophical-theological concepts of *docta ignorantia* and *coincidentia oppositorum* as constructive resources for contemporary synodal practice. Situating the discussion within the historical context of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Vanhoutte examines *De pace fidei* as Nicholas of Cusa's theological response to the urgent need for dialogue and peaceful coexistence among diverse religious traditions. Against this backdrop of political fragmentation and interreligious conflict, the article argues that Cusanus' vision of unity-in-difference offers a foundational framework for synodality, one that embraces epistemic humility and reconciliation of opposites to enable genuine communal discernment and ecclesial dialogue.

Fourth, Joshua Jose R. Ocon's article, *Discoursing Divorce: Three Ethical Readings on the Subject of Divorce*, offers a sustained ethical analysis of marital dissolution through the lenses of Thomistic natural law, Kantian

deontology, and Habermasian discourse ethics, with particular attention to the Philippine context where divorce remains legally prohibited. Framing divorce not merely as a juridical concern but as a deeply ethical issue shaped by Catholic moral influence, Ocon examines how natural law prioritizes the indissolubility of marriage in view of procreation and the common good, while allowing limited prudential accommodations in cases of grave harm. He then contrasts this with Kant's contractual understanding of marriage, which foregrounds personal dignity and autonomy, thereby permitting divorce when the marital bond becomes a site of instrumentalization or abuse. Finally, drawing on Habermas, Ocon argues for discourse ethics as a mediating framework that emphasizes inclusive, rational, and non-coercive consensus-building, especially attentive to marginalized voices affected by the absence of divorce legislation. The article concludes that ethical deliberation on divorce in the Philippines must move beyond polarized legal and religious positions toward a dialogical process capable of addressing human dignity, social justice, and moral pluralism.

Lastly, Francis Aung Thang Shane's *A Plea for an Ethics of Citizenship: Inviting the Catholic Church to Respond to the Democratic Deficit in Southeast Asia* reflects on the growing repressive political systems in the region. While Catholic Social Teaching (CST) promotes the principles of human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity, Shane argues that it lacks clear guidance regarding citizenship in politically constrained contexts. In response, the article proposes a virtue-inspired citizenship affecting political, economic, cultural, and ecological life based on CST's moral anthropology to make the faithful capable citizens of renewing democracy. To implement this, the author suggests five strategies of political literacy, lay empower-

ment, interreligious collaboration, prophetic witness, and internal reform to frame citizenship as a profound ecclesial vocation and responsibility.

The articles in this issue respond to the Jubilee Year's 'signs of the times' by proposing ways to defuse tensions and reset broken relationships. On the day before he died, Pope Francis gave his Easter *Urbi et Orbi* message, appealing to political leaders to be responsible in creating "'weapons' of peace: weapons that build the future, instead of sowing seeds of death."[5] Pope Francis's clamor for peace was reiterated by Pope Leo XIV during his election, emphasizing that the peace of the risen Christ is "A peace that is unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering."[6] Although the Jubilee Year 2025 has passed with many opportunities for global reform missed, the call for just and lasting peace through liberation and social-structural change remains immediate. May these insights thus inspire and strengthen our relationship in the resurrected Christ to walk together (i.e., synodality) to a future where the globalization of indifference is finally overcome by the audacity of hope.

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[5] Francis, *Urbi et Orbi Message of His Holiness Pope Francis,* 20 April 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250420-urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html [accessed 30 December 2025].

[6] Leo XIV, *First Blessing "Urbi et Orbi" of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV,* 8 May 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250508-prima-benedizione-urbietorbi.html [accessed 30 December 2025].

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Extractivism and Survival: Community Resistance through Integral Ecology

Alvenio G. Mozol Jr.

Abstract: Extractive industries, which remove natural resources for global markets, impose severe health and environmental burdens on marginalized communities, producing "sacrifice zones". Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework alongside integral ecology, this paper shows how extractivism operates across interconnected ecological systems, linking effects on individual bodies with wider economic and political structures. Communities respond to extractivism through educational efforts that cultivate critical awareness, collective action such as land defense initiatives, and legal and electoral strategies that have enabled grassroots actors to enter formal politics. This paper examines how integral ecology, which understands human health and ecological conditions as deeply intertwined, offers a framework for interpreting and confronting extractivism's impacts. Drawing on cases from the Philippines and other countries, the analysis illustrates how community-led resistance, context-specific environmental education, and policy-oriented interventions can reconfigure sacrifice zones as sites of renewal. The paper concludes by proposing recommendations that foreground marginalized voices and advance justice-centered sustainability while recognizing affected communities as active agents who organize resistance and shape their environments.

Keywords: Extractivism • Integral Ecology • Environmental Justice • Community Resistance • Health Inequities

Introduction

My father worked as a chemist for a mining company in our Philippine village. Years of exposure to toxic waste weakened his respiratory resilience and reflected coping practices shaped by economic precarity and community dislocation. He eventually died from respiratory illness. Our home stood by a river that was also burdened by toxic waste. Its decay mirrored ecological damage and the

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community's struggles with health and livelihood. Both loss inform an exploration of extractivism.[1]

This personal narrative opens a space for considering how systemic forces intersect with individual and communal lives across other dimensions of human experience. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, extractivism's violence can be understood as intersecting various layers of human ecology, from the most intimate biological processes to the broadest global structures. Neal and Neal argue that ecological systems are better understood as networked, "an overlapping arrangement of structures, each directly or indirectly connected to the others by the direct and indirect social interactions of their participants."[2]

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[1] Extractivism is an economic model focused on intensive extraction and export of raw natural resources (like minerals, oil, timber) with minimal local processing, often benefiting global markets while causing environmental damage, social conflict, and inequality in resource-rich regions, particularly the Global South. It's criticized as a dependency-driven system linked to capitalism, colonialism, and unsustainable practices that prioritize profit over community well-being and ecosystem health, leading to resource depletion and human rights issues. This definition of extractivism is heavily derived from the work of Eduardo Gudynas, a leading Latin American researcher at the Latin American Center for Social Ecology (CLAES). See his book, *Extractivisms: Politics, Economy and Ecology* (Warwickhire, UK: Practical Action Publishing, 2020).

[2] Jennifer Watling Neal and Zachary P. Neal, "Nested or Networked? Future Directions for Ecological Systems Theory," *Social Development* 22, no. 4 (2013), 724. Building on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Jennifer Watling Neal and Zachary P. Neal reconceptualize ecological contexts as networks of social relationships rather than as fixed, nested layers surrounding the individual. In their networked ecological systems framework, developmental settings are defined by patterns of interaction, with microsystems comprising direct social ties and mesosystems representing connections among those ties (e.g., between families and schools). This interpretation aligns with Bronfenbrenner's later emphasis on proximal processes while extending the theory by offering analytic tools from social network analysis that allow ecological influences to

Extractivism is not static; it moves and flows through a "network" of living bodies, community relations and interactions, corporate boardrooms, and government offices. This means that a single event, like a mining company's operations polluting a river, quickly spreads across boundaries to affect everything from workplace safety to distant regulatory decisions and into the biochemistry of bodies. As Darling emphasizes, "the central force in development is the active person: shaping environments, evoking responses from them, and reacting to them,"[3] a principle that recognizes affected communities and individuals not as mere passive victims but as agents who can interpret and resist extractive violence.

At the deep-microsystem level, which corresponds to what Bronfenbrenner thinks of as the individual organism itself,[4] extractive economies impinged on my

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be modeled empirically. Although grounded in Bronfenbrenner's original theory, the present paper adopts this networked advancement to capture the dynamic, overlapping, and relational nature of developmental contexts. Rosa and Tudge emphasize that Bronfenbrenner's theory underwent considerable evolution. In its final bioecological version, "proximal processes" take center stage as the main drivers of development. These are the increasingly complex, two-way interactions between a developing person and people, objects, or symbols in their immediate surroundings, where the person both shapes and is shaped by the environment. Cf. Rosa, Edinete Maria, and Jonathan Tudge, "Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development: Its Evolution from Ecology to Bioecology," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 5, no. 4 (2013): 243-258.

[3] Nancy Darling, "Ecological Systems Theory: The Person in the Center of the Circles," *Research in Human Development* 4, no. 3-4 (2007), 204. All subsequent references to Darling in this section are to this work and page unless otherwise noted.

[4] Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is fully introduced in his foundational book *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (1979), in which he conceptualizes human development as occurring within nested environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem,

father's body: toxic exposure stressed and collapsed his respiratory system at the biological level, evoking a translation of the corporate profit into cellular damage and biochemical breakdown. Chemical pollution severely impacts the respiratory system by causing acute irritation, chronic inflammation, reduced lung function, and the development or exacerbation of diseases like asthma, bronchitis, and lung cancer. Inhaled chemical pollutants penetrate deep into the lungs, triggering oxidative stress and damaging airway tissues. The accumulation of chemical agents broke down his body's basic functions, demonstrating how large-scale economic forces show up in the body's fundamental processes.

At the microsystem level, the immediate environment of face-to-face relationships, his excruciating illness and eventual death entered the household. Global corporate interests are implicated in such intimate experiences of loss and grief. We also grieved over the death of my 18-year old brother who died from bronchopneumonia. The microsystem became marked by departures and absence. Yet this microsystem also became a site of meaning-making, where family members, or at least to this author, actively interpreted the loss not as individual misfortune but as systemic injustice. However, for many members of households, personal tragedies do not always lead them to social critique.

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and macrosystem. The role of time and historical change, later termed the chronosystem, was elaborated more explicitly in subsequent work, particularly his 1986 article "Ecology of the family as a context for human development." Bronfenbrenner further refined the theory in later publications, especially through the bioecological model and the PPCT framework (Process–Person–Context–Time), as presented in his 1998 *Handbook of Child Psychology* chapter and his 2005 volume *Making Human Beings Human*. These works collectively represent the core references for understanding the development and evolution of ecological systems theory.

At Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem level, the connections between different microsystems - our community's relationships with workplaces, markets, and official institutions were shaped by the mining company's presence. Formal transactions and professional encounters occurred under the shadow of environmental harm. The mesosystem became a web of connections shaped by extractivism: how neighbors interacted when borrowing kilos of rice or some small amounts due to delayed salaries; how some Mamanwas (indigenous tribe) turned to alcohol to temporarily relieve stress; how workers talk ill about their employer's or manager's greed. Neal and Neal clarify that mesosystems are not containers within which microsystems are nested but rather "social interaction between participants in different settings that both include the focal individual." In our community, mesosystemic interactions occurred when my father point to workplace hazards with family members during mealtime, or when mothers shared stories about their children's breathing problems. These connections reveal what Darling describes as the "patterning and interrelationship of multiple determinants of development," where no single relationship can be understood separately from the broader network of influences.

Beyond the meso level lies what Bronfenbrenner identifies as the exosystem or social structures and institutions that indirectly affect individuals. In our case, this included corporate boardrooms in distant cities making decisions about mining operations, government agencies issuing permits, and international commodity markets determining how resource extraction should be. These exosystem forces shaped our daily reality without our direct participation in them. Neal and Neal define the exosystem as "a setting, that is, a set of people engaged in social interaction, that does not include, but whose

participants interact directly or indirectly with, the focal individual." This definition clarifies how extractive violence operates as company executives, government regulators, and global investors formed settings in which they interacted to make decisions about mining intensification, waste disposal, and safety protocols. These decisions affected my father's workplace exposure and our community's health, even though we never participated in those decision-making settings. The exosystem shows how power operates at a distance through regulatory failures, corporate governance structures, and global supply chains that treated our community as a "sacrifice zone"[5] without our voices heard in the decision-making processes.

At Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem level, the overarching cultural values, economic systems, and ideological frameworks, global extractive capitalism imposed its instrumental logic, treating both nature and workers as tools or disposable resources. Its widespread presence shaped not only our community's character and ecology but also entered down to the deep-micro biological reality of my father's or brother's failing lungs. The overarching cultural disposition toward profit and growth creates the "rules of the game" for every other part of society. By treating nature as a thing and a product to be sold, this ideology dictates how businesses, governments, and individuals behave. Neal and Neal reconceptualize the macrosystem as "the social patterns that govern the formation and dissolution of social

[5] A "sacrifice zone" can be defined as "a segregated place where the quality of life of its communities is compromised in the name of progress and capital accumulation." Cf. Valenzuela-Fuentes, Katia, Esteban Alarcón-Barrueto, and Robinson Torres-Salinas, "From Resistance to Creation: Socio Environmental Activism in Chile's 'Sacrifice Zones'," *Sustainability* 13, no. 6 (2021), 3481. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063481.

interactions between individuals, and thus the relationships among ecological systems." Extractivism is driven by social circles where corporate leaders, politicians, and investors all share the same goal: making money and more money.[6] Because these groups stick together and share the same pro-growth beliefs, they create a system of influence that protects their profits while subordinating well-being and ignoring the harm done to marginalized communities. As Darling notes, understanding this dimension requires recognizing that "the instrumental perspective is assumed as non-negotiable; inherently designed to be impersonal to ensure consistency, efficiency, and objectivity," yet this apparent neutrality masks deep structural violence.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem, the dimension of time and historical change, reveals how extractivism's impacts build up across life stages and generations. My father's and brother's exposure occurred over years of employment and living in the area[7]; the river's pollution built up across decades of mining operations[8]; and the consequences will persist in our community's health and ecological systems for generations to come. This time dimension captures Nixon's concept of "slow violence," showing how environmental destruction unfolds gradually across the chronosystem, making it difficult to perceive or resist in any single moment. The chronosystem also includes

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[6] This paper sides with the stand of Alyansa Tigil Mina in opposing mining in the Philippines as it is practiced today or elsewhere. Cf. https://www.alyansatigilmina.net/.

[7] Chemicals were also brought home, and my father's alchemical activities got extended to the household.

[8] In 1998, I penned a poem titled "Postscript to the Sunset Over Mabuhay," included in my 2015 book. "Mabuhay" which means "long live" was cast in the poem with irony with the dying river, lacerated earth, and "people's hope hanging excruciatingly on the edge of crevices."

historical shifts in mining practices, evolving environmental regulations, and changing community resistance strategies, all of which shape the developmental context across time.[9]

If the chronosystem reveals how extractivism's violence accumulates across time, then space shows us where that violence happens and how it moves through the territories of our lives. Nathania and Wahid wrote: "In a narrative environment, order of events and pace comprise the whole spatial trajectory, which determines the duration of experiencing the narrative environment."[10] This is evident in how mining companies impose their temporal operations onto embodied, physical scapes.[11]

My father's lungs absorbed chemicals he handled in the laboratory where he assayed gold and measured nitrites. The chemicals followed him home, blurring the boundary between workplace and domestic space. Our house by the river stood within the pollution itself. My brother's body, like my father's, became permeable to atmospheric spaces saturated with industrial residue until bronchopneumonia took him at eighteen. The community was a network of spaces shaped by extraction. Makeshift huts and wobbly shelters occupied

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[9] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[10] Kezia Nathania, and Arif Rahman Wahid, "Spatialising Time: Perceiving Multiple Layers of Time in Narrative Environment," *ARSNET* 2, no. 2 (2022): 112.

[11] The use here of "impose" is intentional as a rebuttal to the argument that individuals and families have choices not to work in the mining industry. The counter-argument comes more poignantly from Bishop Gerardo Alminaza of Caritas Philippines, averring that "We do not condemn workers who depend on mining. We condemn a system that forces people to choose between survival and destruction." CBCPNews. "Catholic Leaders: Extending Semirara Coal Deal Is 'Reckless,'" January 19, 2026. https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/catholic-leaders-extending-semirara-coal-deal-is-reckless/.

land too close to contamination. Stores selling cigarettes and alcohol became sites where workers sought relief. Secret "vaults" where money was kept for lending to cash-strapped families operated alongside the extraction of minerals. Dusty road to the mining area, suffocating in summer but muddy during the rains, facilitated the movement of ore-laden trucks while constraining community mobility. The school space received financial support from the company, gestures that framed corporate presence as beneficence. Markets transformed minerals into global commodities, abstracting gold from its origins in bodies and land. The hospital space documented illness without linking symptoms to their sources. The cemetery gathered our dead on ground that shared the logic of life's emergence. Silent spaces of land stripped of vegetation expanded across the mountainscape, marking ecological loss. Atmospheric spaces functioned as repositories for pollutants. These spaces formed an interconnected geography where wage labor, family life, financial strain, illness, grief, and environmental degradation occupied overlapping terrain. As Bansel argues, rather than static containers, space and time operate as relational processes, that is, dynamic and generative practices through which people, objects, and the world itself are constantly brought into being and reshaped.[12] In extractive contexts, they organize the movements and exposures of the human and more-than-human world that construct vulnerability across generations.

Integral ecology shows that environmental crises cannot be separated from human health and social

[12] Peter Bansel, "Same but Different: Space, Time and Narrative," *Literacy* 47, no. 1 (2013): 4-9.

fabric.[13] Bronfenbrenner's framework, particularly when understood through the networked model proposed by Neal and Neal, shows how these dimensions interlock through patterns of social interaction: the spiritual impoverishment of communities (macrosystem social patterns) connects to disrupted cultural practices (mesosystem interactions across settings), which link to family rituals of care (microsystem relationships), affecting individual bodies and psyches (deep-microsystem). This ecological understanding aligns with integral ecology's insistence that "everything is connected" and that addressing environmental crises requires attending to their manifestation across all levels of human experience simultaneously. My family's experience connects to the struggles of others across mining-affected regions. Private grief connects to collective injustice as the macro dimension of extractivism interlocks with and enters every other level of existence from the biochemical to the interpersonal to the institutional. Understanding these networked ecological systems reveals that resisting extractivism requires interventions at multiple levels simultaneously. This framework positions affected communities not as passive followers of necessary work or recipients of harm but as active agents who interpret their experiences, organize resistance, and shape their environments—all essential to justice-centered approaches to environmental sustainability.

Extractivism's toll on health and ecology

Extractivist violence often moves slowly, causing harm that builds up over time rather than hitting all at

[13] Jerzy Gocko, "Ecology and Justice: From Environmental Justice to Integral Ecology in Laudato Si'," *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 22, no. 1 (2024): 75–82. https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.5799.

once like a sudden disaster. Communities face a steady breakdown and erosion of their well-being through constant exposure to stressful and alienating profit-driven work, toxins, polluted air, and the loss of reliable food sources. This process does more than just damage physical health; it destroys the social-cultural foundations of a community by erasing the traditional knowledge tied to the very rivers, forests, and farmlands they rely on. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," articulated in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, captures this phenomenon of environmental destruction that occurs gradually and invisibly, accumulating across time and space in ways that statistics alone cannot measure but communities feel or subconsciously remember in daily life. The erosion of ecological systems through geodiversity loss, the degradation of geological and hydrological systems, does not only diminish nature's capacity to buffer disasters such as floods or droughts, but also compound a Weltanschauung turmoil and vulnerabilities in exploited and marginalized communities.

The Philippines' status as the world's second largest nickel producer and largest exporter of nickel ore exemplifies how extraction of minerals for the energy transition leads to deforestation, environmental damage, and serious harm to rural and Indigenous communities. In the provinces of Zambales and Palawan, home to some of the largest nickel deposits in the Philippines, deforestation and environmental pollution from nickel mining undermine the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Communities report adverse harms to their livelihoods, access to water, and health. Santa Cruz in Zambales can be considered a "sacrifice zone," where residents suffer physical and mental health consequences as a result of living in pollution hotspots and heavily contaminated areas, while Brooke's Point in

Palawan risks becoming one if nickel mining operations continue.[14]

Indigenous feminist scholarship emphasizes that extractivism wounds the Earth as a living being, directly challenging settler colonial frameworks that separate feeling from knowing. These frameworks also disconnect doing from understanding, masking the reality that environmental damage is material evidence of violence that the Earth, as Mother-Sister, physically feels.[15] Extractive industries do not just target the land; they assault Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and relating to the world. A systematic review by Morton and colleagues examining Indigenous communities in settler colonial states, including Australia and Aotearoa, shows that land dispossession from resource development leads to mental health challenges. The review also examines communities in the Americas. Mining and agriculture disrupt Indigenous identities and languages. They sever traditions and spiritual connections to land. This exacerbates psychological distress.[16] The concept of "environmental violence," as theorized by Marcantonio and Fuentes, provides a framework to understand human-produced pollution from extractive industries as

[14] "Philippines: What Do We Get in Return? How the Philippines Nickel Boom Harms Human Rights," *Amnesty International* (January 9, 2025), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/8607/2024/en/.

[15] Jeffrey Ansloos and Rebecca Beaulne-Stuebing, "Wounds on This Turtle's Back: On Feeling Extractivism and Felt Theories of Change," *Environmental Justice* 18, no. 4 (11 August 2025). https://doi.org/10.1089/env.2023.0055.

[16] Megan E. Morton et al., "Indigenous Communities and the Mental Health Impacts of Land Dispossession Related to Industrial Resource Development: A Systematic Review," *The Lancet Planetary Health* 7, no. 6 (2023): e501-e517.

violence.[17] It contributes to global health inequities through toxic emissions and ecological harm. This approach underscores pollution's impacts on human (and other living beings') health. It urges stronger legal and social accountability for extractive practices.[18]

Extractivism is more than just an economic activity; it is a structural force that drives health inequities, community breakdown, and ecological instability. In the Philippine context, weak governance and legal pluralism enable foreign-led mining and agribusiness to displace communities and pollute environments.[19] These industries cause respiratory illnesses, reproductive complications, and malnutrition.[20] Contaminated rivers

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[17] Richard Marcantonio and Agustín Fuentes, "Environmental Violence: A Tool for Planetary Health Research," *The Lancet Planetary Health* 7, no. 10 (2023): e859-e867

[18] Simon Bornschier and Manuel Vogt, "The Politics of Extractivism," *World Development* 176 (2024): 106493.

[19] "Philippines: What Do We Get in Return?"

[20] Ronald Herrera, Katja Radon, Ondine S. von Ehrenstein, Stella Cifuentes, Daniel Moraga Muñoz, and Ursula Berger, "Proximity to Mining Industry and Respiratory Diseases in Children in a Community in Northern Chile: A Cross-Sectional Study," *Environmental Health* 15, no. 66 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-016-0149-5; Rina Hariniaina Razafimahefa, Jerico Franciscus Pardosi, and Adem Sav, "Occupational Factors Affecting Women Workers' Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes in Oil, Gas, and Mining Industry: A Scoping Review," *Public Health Reviews* 43 (Apr 2022):1604653. doi: 10.3389/phrs.2022.1604653. PMID: 35574566; PMCID: PMC9096608; Aboagye Kwarteng Dofuor, Hanif Lutuf, Rahmat Quaigrane Duker, George Edusei, Bernice Araba Otoo, Jonathan Osei Owusu, Angelina Fathia Osabutey, et al. "Promoting Sustainable Mining for Health, Food Security and Biodiversity Conservation," *CABI Reviews* (May 2025). https://doi.org/10.1079/cabireviews.2025.0036; Ngianga-Bakwin Kandala, Tumwaka P Madungu, Jacques BO Emina, Kikhela PD Nzita, and Francesco P Cappuccio, "Malnutrition among Children under the Age of Five in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Does Geographic Location Matter?," *BMC Public Health* 11, no. 1 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-261.

carry toxins into bodies and livelihoods. In Colombia, illegal gold mining drives malaria by creating breeding grounds through deforestation and water contamination.[21] These sacrifice zones are geographies of environmental injustice. They enable prosperity elsewhere while local communities suffer.[22] "One Health" research,[23] an approach that recognizes the interconnections between human health, animal health, and environmental health, links ecological harm to human disease. Mining waste disrupts habitats and health across generations.[24]

Nickel mining expansion, driven by green extractivism for transition minerals,[25] shows how corporate strategies prioritize profit over local well-being.

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[21] Sandra V. Rozo, "Unintended Effects of Illegal Gold Mining and Malaria," *World Development* 136 (2020): 105119.

[22] Hannes Warnecke-Berger and Julia Ickler, *The Political Economy of Extractivism* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[23] One Health research is an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental health, emphasizing that health outcomes arise from their dynamic interactions. It integrates perspectives from medicine, veterinary science, ecology, and public health to address complex challenges such as zoonotic disease, antimicrobial resistance, and environmental change through coordinated, systems-level action. See Jakob Zinsstag et al., "From 'One Medicine' to 'One Health' and Systemic Approaches to Health and Well-Being," *Preventive Veterinary Medicine* 101, nos. 3–4 (2011): 148–156.

[24] Johnston and Cushing, "Chemical Exposures, Health, and Environmental Justice," 48-57.

[25] "Transition minerals" is a policy-driven term designating minerals critical for low-carbon energy technologies, strategically framed to justify expanded mineral extraction under the guise of climate action. Critical scholarship shows that this framing can mask socio-environmental justice concerns and reproduce extractivist and colonial-capitalist models, even as it presents mining as ethically aligned with climate action. Cf. Amelia Hine, Chris Gibson, and Robyn Mayes, "Critical Minerals: Rethinking Extractivism?" *Australian Geographer* 54, no. 3 (2023): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2023.2210733.

Companies fail to deliver promised sustainability while exacerbating environmental degradation,[26] abiding by the competitive dynamics of global markets. Extractivism damages geodiversity through mining-induced soil erosion or river pollution, which undermines the foundation of healthy ecosystems and exacerbates health inequities in affected communities.[27]

From personal-psychological to social solidarity: the transformative power of education

Educational projects do more than transfer knowledge. They create a movement from individual psychological coping to collective social solidarity. This transformation follows what Durkheim called the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity. In extractivism-affected communities, an earlier form of solidarity existed through shared experience, common suffering, and collective identity as victims of environmental harm. However, effective resistance requires evolving toward organic solidarity, where specialized knowledge, differentiated roles in advocacy, and interdependent action create a stronger, more resilient form of social cohesion.[28] Community-based environmental education serves as the catalyst for this transformation, building

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[26] Mads Barbesgaard and Andy Whitmore, "'Blood on the floor": The Nickel Commodity Frontier and Inter-capitalist Competition under Green Extractivism." *Journal of Political Ecology* 31, no. 1 (2023): 567–585. doi: https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5458

[27] Janne Alahuhta et al., "Acknowledging Geodiversity in Safeguarding Biodiversity and Human Health," *The Lancet Planetary Health* 6, no. 12 (2022): e987-e992. Geodiversity is the variety of non-living natural components, such as geological formations, soil types, and hydrological systems, which underpins biodiversity. This diversity influences human health by shaping ecosystems and providing aesthetic and sensory benefits.

[28] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1984 [1893]), 68.

what Freire termed "critical consciousness" through dialogue rather than top-down instruction.[29]

Educational projects transfer knowledge and foster collective responsibility. They encourage participants to see themselves as custodians of their environment, not only victims of extractive harm. Drawing on Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, these initiatives reject the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners. Instead, they employ problem-posing education, where community members and facilitators engage in dialogue to critically analyze their lived reality.[30] This approach recognizes that marginalized communities already possess knowledge about their environment and extractivism's impacts. Education becomes a process of naming these experiences, connecting personal struggles to systemic injustice, and developing collective strategies for transformation through praxis - the combination of reflection and action.

Workshops and mapping exercises strengthen solidarity by reminding communities of their shared history and collective agency. These spaces function as what Freire called "culture circles" or horizontal learning environments where participants investigate generative themes drawn from their own experiences, such as water contamination, health impacts, or corporate deception. Education becomes a political act. It contests the narratives of inevitability that corporations and some state actors promote. The political dimension of environmental education lies not in partisan advocacy but in its fundamental challenge to relationships of

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[29] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000 [1970]), 72-73.

[30] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43-47.

domination.[31] As Freire insisted, education is inherently liberating because it enables the oppressed to "perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform."[32]

Harnessing cultural bonds for resistance: the role of informal spaces

The success of community-led environmental education depends on cultural factors that strengthen solidarity and on informal spaces that have not been colonized by extractive systems. These spaces, whether community centers, religious gathering places, playgrounds, or the sari-sari stores where neighbors converge, serve as sites of resistance work where alternative knowledge can flourish.[33] When extractive industries dominate formal institutions like schools, workplaces, and government offices, these informal spaces become essential for maintaining what Durkheim identified as the "collective conscience,"[34] the shared

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[31] Ellen Prusinski, "What Is Political about a Tree? Grappling with Partisan Divides in Environmental Education," *Environmental Education Research* 30, no. 9 (2024): 1460–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2024.2330988.

[32] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72-73.

[33] John Paul Takona, "Transformative Education: Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Its Contemporary Resonance," *Journal of Global Education and Research* 9, no. 1 (2025): 92-94.

[34] Émile Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within a society. Articulated most clearly in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), the collective conscience shapes social cohesion by regulating individual behavior and sustaining social order, particularly in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity. For Durkheim, changes in the content and strength of the collective conscience reflect broader transformations in social structure and forms of solidarity.

values and moral frameworks that bind communities together. In mining-affected communities, informal spaces preserve cultural practices, traditional ecological knowledge, and moral commitments to land and water that the formal economy seeks to erase.

Community time, the temporal rhythms of collective life also depends on these cultural bonds and informal spaces.[35] When communities control their own time through festivals, games, religious observances, or traditional gathering practices, they create opportunities for dialogue and organizing that exist outside the extractive economy's temporal demands. These moments allow for the slow work of consciousness-raising that Freire described, where people gradually come to see their personal troubles as public issues requiring collective action. People's initiatives show that alternatives exist and that ordinary people possess the expertise to document harm. They disrupt the cycle of passivity and silence that surrounds environmental destruction. Breaking this silence requires moving from a "culture of silence," where the oppressed internalize the oppressor's view of them as ignorant and incapable, to a culture of voice and agency.[36]

Place-based applications: building critical consciousness through dialogue

In the Philippine context, community-led programs teach residents about mining's health impacts. They use local knowledge to map polluted rivers and monitor diseases. These initiatives embody Freire's dialogical method where facilitators do not lecture about mining's

[35] Shlomy Kattan, "Time and Identity: Socializing Schedules and the Implications for Community," *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 16, no. 1 (2008). https://doi.org/10.5070/l4161005091.

[36] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72-73.

dangers but instead pose problems, "What has happened to our river?" "Why do so many children have breathing problems?" Through dialogue, community members generate their own analysis, connecting observable environmental degradation to corporate practices and state failures. These initiatives empower communities to document harm, such as water contamination linked to respiratory issues. They share findings through workshops.[37] The act of collective documentation transforms participants from objects of research into subjects of knowledge production, enacting Freire's vision of education as humanization.

In Barangay Acmac, Iligan City, community-led initiatives foster environmental awareness by emphasizing collaborative decision-making and sustainable practices. Residents address local environmental challenges.[38] This collaborative approach builds organic solidarity by creating specialized roles of being planners, documenters, community health workers, and legal advocates, whose interdependence strengthens the movement. Unlike mechanical solidarity based solely on shared suffering or identity, this organic solidarity harnesses diverse skills and knowledge in coordinated action.[39] These efforts highlight the power of

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[37] Peter Thijssen, "From Mechanical to Organic Solidarity, and Back: With Honneth Beyond Durkheim," *European Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 4 (2012): 462-465.

[38] Eslit, Edgar, "Empowering Change at the Grassroots: Community-Led Initiatives for Local Environmental Protection," *Empowering Change at the Grassroots: Community-Led Initiatives for Local Environmental Protection* (July 2023). https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202307.1055.v1.

[39] Émile Durkheim introduces the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), where he explains how different forms of social cohesion correspond to different types of social organization. Mechanical solidarity characterizes societies with high levels of similarity among individuals and a strong, collective moral consciousness, while organic

education in promoting environmental justice. They equip communities with tools to advocate for change.

In Colombia, campaigns educate villagers about malaria risks from illegal mining. They promote collective monitoring of water sources.[40] Here, environmental education addresses immediate health threats while building long-term capacity for resistance. The collective monitoring networks exemplify Freire's concept of praxis where communities reflect on the relationship between illegal mining and disease, then take action to monitor and protect water sources, which generates new knowledge that informs further reflection and action. These programs, rooted in place-based expertise, counter corporate "greenwashing," the practice of misleading claims about environmental benefits, that hides extractivism's toll.[41] By naming and analyzing greenwashing as a specific form of ideological domination, these educational programs help participants develop what Freire called "critical

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solidarity emerges in more complex societies where social cohesion is based on differentiation, interdependence, and the division of labor.

[40] Maylis Douine, Yann Lambert, Lise Musset, Helene Hiwat, Liana Reis Blume, Paola Marchesini, Gilberto Gilmar Moresco, et al., "Malaria in Gold Miners in the Guianas and the Amazon: Current Knowledge and Challenges," *Current Tropical Medicine Reports* 7, no. 2 (2020): 37–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40475-020-00202-5. See also Lisseth Casso-Hartmann, Paulina Rojas-Lamos, Kelli McCourt, Irene Vélez-Torres, Luz Edith Barba-Ho, Byron Wladimir Bolaños, Claudia Lorena Montes, Jaime Mosquera, and Diana Vanegas, "Water Pollution and Environmental Policy in Artisanal Gold Mining Frontiers: The Case of La Toma, Colombia," *Social Science Research Network* (January 2022). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4119261.

[41] Chang, Liang, Min Tang, Kuangxuan Xu, and Wenrui Zhao, "Anatomy of Corporate Pseudo-Social Responsibility Behavior: Identification Mechanism and Preventive Countermeasures of Greenwashing Phenomenon," *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management* 45 (December 2024): 880–88. https://doi.org/10.54097/sze0x087.

consciousness" - the capability to recognize oppressive systems and envision alternatives.

Across these contexts, community-led environmental education succeeds not by imposing external frameworks but by creating dialogical spaces where communities can examine their reality, recognize extractivism as a limiting but not permanent situation, and develop collective strategies for transformation. This educational praxis builds both the critical consciousness needed to name injustice and the organic solidarity needed to resist it, transform it.

Vision-mission and cultural foundations of resistance

Resistance creates narratives that foster "world-making," the practice of asserting alternative values and creating new social realities against market logics.[42] However, to fully understand resistance movements, we recognize that they are grounded in vision-mission frameworks rooted in culture, myth, and models of resistance passed down through generations. Indigenous and community-based resistance to extractivism does not emerge from nowhere but rather draws upon deep cultural memory, ancestral teachings about relationship to land and water, and cosmovisions that position

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[42] Alexandre de Pádua Cariere, Dimitris Papadopoulos, Edson Antunes Quaresma Júnior, and Alfredo Rodrigues Leite da Silva, "The Ontology of Resistance: Power, Tactics and Making Do in the Vila Rubim Market," *Urban Studies* 58, no. 8 (2020): 1615–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020912193. Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton, "Notes towards Autonomous Geographies: Creation, Resistance and Self-Management as Survival Tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 6 (2006): 730–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132506071516.

humans as caretakers rather than exploiters of nature.[43] A case in point: the Sarayaku, an Amazonian Kichwa community in Ecuador gained international attention a decade ago for successfully expelling the Argentinean CGC oil company and winning a court case against the state for granting oil concessions without consultation. To protect themselves from future extractive projects, the community created the legal concept of *kawsak sacha* ("the living jungle"), which recognizes the jungle as inhabited by visible and non-visible beings with legal rights. Drawing on this worldview, Sarayaku has cultivated a broader anti-colonial, anti-extractivist, and anti-capitalist culture of resistance. Based on ethnographic research and interviews, it is argued that while legal protections can be overturned, this internally rooted culture of resistance is more resilient and remains under the community's control.[44]

The resistance movements across mining-affected communities draw strength not only from ancestral memory but from deeply rooted cultural concepts of interconnection. In the Philippine context, the concept of *kapwa*, "the perceived state of shared identity and interdependent relationships,"[45] provides a philosophical foundation for resistance that challenges Western individualism. *Kapwa* recognizes a "'unity' of the self and

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[43] Ksenija Hanaček, Dalena Tran, Arielle Landau, Teresa Sanz, May Aye Thiri, Grettel Navas, Daniela Del Bene, et al., "'We are Protectors, not Protestors': Global Impacts of Extractivism on Human-nature Bonds. *Sustainability Science* 19, no.6 (2024):1789-1808. doi: 10.1007/s11625-024-01526-1. Epub 2024 Aug 23. PMID: 39526229; PMCID: PMC11543721.

[44] Leonidas Oikonomakis, "We Protect the Forest Beings, and the Forest Beings Protect Us: Cultural Resistance in the Ecuadorian Amazonia," *VU Research Portal* 26, no. 1 (2020): 129–46. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4315282.

[45] Thia Cooper, "Method and Themes for a Philippine Theology of Development," *MST Review* 25, no. 1 (2023): 136-172. https://mstreview.com/index.php/mst/article/view/695.

others," understanding oneself always in relation to community. This collectivist, relational worldview aligns with Indigenous cosmovisions globally that position humans not as separate from but as part of nature and each other. When mining companies pollute a river or destroy a forest, the harm is not experienced as damage to external property but as violence against the shared self, against *kapwa*. This understanding transforms environmental defense from abstract advocacy into intimate protection of collective identity and being. The concept of *kapwa* thus offers both a critique of extractive capitalism's atomized individualism and a vision for postextractive futures grounded in mutual care and interdependence.

Cultural memory serves as both foundation and fuel for resistance.[46] Indigenous communities worldwide hold memories of dispossession, broken treaties, forced relocations, and environmental destruction that stretch across generations.[47] Yet cultural memory also preserves knowledge of successful resistance, of ancestors who refused to submit, of spiritual practices that sustained communities through colonization, and of alternative ways of organizing human-nature relationships.[48] This dual function of cultural memory, remembering both trauma and resilience, enables communities to contextualize current extractive projects within longer

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[46] Nayab Sadiq, "Indigeneity and Resistance in Zubair Ahmad's Grieving for Pigeons," *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* 22, no. II (2024): 49–63. https://doi.org/10.52015/numljci.v22iii.294.

[47] Melissa Walls, "The Perpetual Influence of Historical Trauma: A Broad Look at Indigenous Families and Communities in Areas Now Called the United States and Canada," *International Migration Review* (December 2023). https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231218973.

[48] Erica Neeganagwedgin, "Ancestral Knowledges, Spirituality and Indigenous Narratives as Self Determination," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 9, no. 4 (2013): 322–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011300900404.

histories of colonial violence while simultaneously drawing upon proven strategies of survival and resistance.[49]

These resistance movements are guided by visions of alternative futures that reject the inevitability of extractive capitalism. Rather than accepting sacrifice zones as the price of development, communities envision and work toward what could be called "postextractive futures": ways of organizing economic and social life that prioritize ecological health, cultural survival, and relational well-being over GDP growth and capital accumulation.[50] Indigenous leadership in particular offers models for these alternative futures, drawing on concepts like "living in harmony with the community, others, and the spirit world," where wellness is understood not as individual material accumulation but as balance within interconnected systems.[51] Plans like Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit (Spirit of the Salmon), developed by Columbia River tribes, demonstrate how traditional ecological knowledge can be integrated with scientific principles to envision holistic restoration that serves both human communities and more-than-human worlds.[52]

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[49] Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Mapuche Mnemonics: Beyond Modernity's Violence," *Memory Studies* 8, no. 1 (2014): 75–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698014552410.

[50] Pabel Camilo and Eija Ranta, "Post-Extractivist Horizons in Latin America: Between Utopias and Struggles for Re-Existence against Neo-Extractivism," *Sociological Research Online* (November 2024). https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804241275293; Parvez Anam, Butt, Berkhout Esmé, Chawkat Zaghbour, Mira Bush, Alex Liepollo Pheko, and Lebohang Verma Ritu, "Radical Pathways beyond GDP: Why and How We Need to Pursue Feminist and Decolonial Alternatives Urgently," *Oxfam Policy & Practice* (2023). https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/radical-pathways-beyond-gdp-621532/.

[51] "Indigenous Resistance Movements."

[52] Giulia C. S. Good Stefani, "Indigenous Leaders at the Frontlines of Environmental Injustice and Solutions," (Oct 11, 2021).

Barricades, assemblies, and rituals performed at protest sites transform contested spaces into arenas of cultural affirmation. These gestures communicate that defending land is inseparable from defending identity and future generations. The performance of traditional rituals at protest sites, the invocation of ancestral names and stories, and the use of Indigenous languages in resistance chants all function to assert cultural continuity and spiritual authority. These practices transform physical blockades into ceremonies of cultural renewal, reminding both protesters and witnesses that the struggle is not merely political or economic but deeply spiritual.[53] Activists take risks in the face of violent retaliation. This reveals commitment to principles that transcend material survival. Resistance carries a pedagogical dimension. It teaches younger members that dignity involves saying no to destructive practices, even when refusal comes at personal cost. This intergenerational teaching represents what Indigenous leadership scholars call "restorying," the practice of countering dominant narratives of inevitability and powerlessness with stories of agency, resistance, and alternative possibilities that younger generations can carry forward.[54]

Inspired leadership and participatory models

https://www.nrdc.org/bio/giulia-cs-good-stefani/indigenous-leaders-frontlines-environmental-injustice-and-solutions

[53] Gandhi Ajay, "Indigenous Resistance to New Colonialism," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 2001, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/indigenous-resistance-new-colonialism

[54] Tina Ngaroimata Fraser and Carolyn Kenny, eds., *Living Indigenous Leadership: Native Narratives on Building Strong Communities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 12-34.

Effective resistance to extractivism requires inspired leadership that embodies cultural values while adapting to contemporary challenges. Indigenous leadership models offer important alternatives to hierarchical corporate or state leadership. These models emphasize collective decision-making, consensus-building, elevation of elder wisdom, and holistic approaches to problem-solving that integrate ethical, spiritual, and practical considerations.[55] Leaders like those who emerged from the San Fernando, Romblon resistance or the Standing Rock water protectors do not function as heroic individuals but rather as facilitators of collective action, people who "introduce new knowledge, challenge assumptions, convince people that things can be different, propose change, and mobilize the community to take action."[56]

Inspired leadership in resistance movements operates through trust, adaptability, and vision rather than hierarchical power. Leaders gain authority not through position but through demonstrated commitment to community well-being, cultural knowledge, spiritual grounding, and willingness to take personal risks.[57] The predominantly Indigenous and largely female leadership of many environmental justice movements challenges patriarchal and authoritarian models of organization, instead creating spaces for participatory decision-making where diverse voices, especially those of women and

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[55] Charles Kojo Vandyck, "Embracing Indigenous Leadership Models for Africa's Development Renaissance – WACSI," (16 Aug 2023). https://wacsi.org/embracing-indigenousleadership-models-for-africas-development-renaissance/.

[56] Miriam Jorgensen, quoted in Veronica L. Veaux, "Indigenous Leadership," in *Springer Encyclopedia of Business and Management*, ed. C. Voyageur, L. Brearley, and B. Calliou (Cham: Springer, 2024), 73.

[57] Fraser and Kenny, *Living Indigenous Leadership*, 12-34.

youth, shape strategy and direction.[58] This participatory model strengthens resilience by distributing knowledge, building collective capacity, and ensuring that movements can continue even when individual leaders face repression or violence.[59]

Youth leadership has become particularly significant in contemporary resistance movements. Young Indigenous activists use social media platforms to bypass traditional gatekeepers and share frontline realities directly with global audiences through hashtags like #NoDAPL, #StopLine3, and #IdleNoMore.[60] Youth organizers bring technological literacy, cross-cultural coalition-building skills, and fresh energy while elder leaders provide historical context, cultural grounding, and strategic wisdom, creating intergenerational collaboration that strengthens movements. Young leaders like those from the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Sioux who organized a 2,000-mile relay run to deliver petitions, or youth from the Umatilla Indian Reservation who called on President Biden to restore salmon habitat, demonstrate how emerging leadership rejuvenates resistance while maintaining connection to cultural foundations and visions for alternative futures.[61]

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[58] Manuela L. Picq, "Resistance to Extractivism and Megaprojects in Latin America," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (19 Nov. 2020).

[59] Jaskiran Dhillon, ed., *Indigenous Resurgence: Decolonization and Movements for Environmental Justice* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022), 1-18.

[60] Chase Puentes and Nicoletter Worrell, "Indigenous Youth Leadership: Resistance in the Age of Pipelines," School of Marine and Environmental Affairs, University of Washington (Feb 24, 2022), https://smea.uw.edu/currents/indigenous-youth-leadership-resistance-in-the-age-of-pipelines/.

[61] CRITFC, "Spirit of the Salmon Plan."

Philippine contexts: from protest to political power

Empowerment through community resistance manifests in the Philippine context. In San Fernando, Romblon, residents formed a human barricade in 2023 to block mining trucks. Their leader won election as mayor in 2025.[62] This trajectory from grassroots resistance to formal political power illustrates how sustained collective action can transform local governance, enabling communities to institutionalize opposition to extractivism through electoral means. The mayor's victory represents not just individual political success but community validation of resistance as legitimate political platform and vision for alternative development. This reflects the power of collective action rooted in local identity.

Community resistance to extractivism does not emerge in a vacuum but is significantly shaped by what Dagmang calls the "hidden" or "implicit" realities of geography, social formations, and culture. In agricultural and less-urbanized settings like San Fernando or rural Marinduque, resistance gains strength from pre-existing patterns of neighborhood cooperation, less-regimented work schedules that allow community availability, and cultural memory rooted in shared spaces - the *bundok, patag, at dagat* (mountains, plains, and seas) that trigger memories of collective labor and mutual support. These island-provincial or rural-agricultural lifeworlds provide what urban settings often lack: time for community organizing after work, spaces not colonized by commercial interests, and social dispositions toward

[62] Jerry Mangaluz, "From Protest to Power: Activist Now Mayor in Romblon," *Philstar.com* (May 14, 2025), https://www.philstar.com/nation/2025/05/14/2443067/protest-power-activist-who-blocked-mining-trucks-now-mayor-romblon.

pakikipagkapwa (fellowship) and *bayanihan* (communal work). Understanding these geographical and cultural enablers helps explain why extractive resistance thrives in certain contexts while struggling in others, and why successful movements often emerge from rural and indigenous communities whose lifeworlds have not yet been fully colonized by capitalist time-discipline and spatial organization.[63]

Similarly, in South Cotabato province, local communities mobilized against a proposed opencast coal mine that would extract from the Philippines' potentially largest coal deposit. These mobilizations challenged the state's capital-led and nature-divorced extraction, advocating for Indigenous People's rights and calling for justice in development approaches.[64] The South Cotabato resistance demonstrates how communities articulate alternative visions of development that center Indigenous rights, ecological sustainability, and local self-determination rather than accepting the state's framing of megaprojects as inevitable or beneficial. By explicitly naming the regime as "capital-led" and "nature-divorced," protesters challenged the ideological foundations of extractivism itself.

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[63] Ferdinand D. Dagmang, "Geography, Society, and Culture: Enablers (or Inhibitors) of Basic Ecclesial Community Development," *MST Review* 24, no. 1 (2022):1-36. https://mstreview.com/index.php/mst/article/view/678. Conversely, according to Dagmang, urban geographies dominated by contractual employment, commercial preoccupations, and built environments imbued with corporate power, what Dagmang calls spaces "imbued with the spirit and power of Coca-Cola, Citibank, BPI", present greater obstacles to sustained collective action, as workers separated from their communities for 10-16 hours daily struggle to find time and energy for neighborhood-based resistance.

[64] Laurence L. Delina, "Topographies of Coal Mining Dissent: Power, Politics, and Protests in Southern Philippines," *World Development* 137 (2021): 105194.

Resistance in action: from local mobilizations to policy transformation

Beyond the Philippines, Indigenous and rural communities in Colombia resist illegal mining through land defense councils. They protect water sources and traditional practices.[65] These land defense councils function as parallel governance structures that assert community authority over territorial decision-making in contexts where formal state institutions have failed to protect communities or have actively facilitated dispossession. The councils draw upon both traditional Indigenous governance models and contemporary organizational strategies, creating hybrid forms of resistance appropriate to current conditions while rooted in cultural memory.[66] This resistance highlights how colonial histories and state-led corporate dispossession continue environmental racism and structural violence against ethnic communities. Local opposition breaks apart extractivist development models by highlighting the injustices imposed on Indigenous communities.

Resistance to extractive megaprojects meets violence with Latin America representing 60% of nature defenders killed worldwide as of 2020.[67] The Philippines is consistently ranked as one of the most dangerous countries for forest and environmental defenders, with

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[65] Irene Vélez-Torres and Diana Vanegas, "Contentious Environmental Governance in Polluted Gold Mining Geographies: The Case of La Toma, Colombia," *World Development* 157 (2022): 105953.

[66] Vélez-Torres and Vanegas, "Contentious Environmental Governance," 105953.

[67] Carlos Conde, "Philippines Worst in Asia for Killings of Environmental Defenders," Human Rights Watch, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/10/philippines-worst-asia-killings-environmental-defenders.

dozens of activists murdered annually.[68] This violence against environmental defenders is not incidental but rather a deliberate strategy to suppress resistance and protect extractive industries. Governments and corporations collaborate to frame defenders as terrorists, criminals, or obstacles to development, criminalizing protest and deploying state security forces and paramilitary groups to intimidate, assault, or kill those who resist.[69] Despite this brutal repression, communities have developed new forms of resistance that recognize personal sacrifice may be required to defend nature and rights to self-determination. The willingness of water protectors at Standing Rock to face attack dogs, water cannons in freezing temperatures, rubber bullets, and mass arrests, or of Philippine community members to physically block mining trucks with their bodies, demonstrates commitment that transcends individual safety and speaks to collective determination to protect future generations.[70] Cultural memory of ancestral resistance to colonization provides both inspiration and tactical knowledge for contemporary struggles, while visions of alternative futures sustain activists through immediate dangers and setbacks.[71]

Ecuador's Rio Blanco mine demonstrates how resistance emerges through coordinated strategies that blend street protests with legal action. Rural communities and urban youth mobilized alongside lawyers and academics to suspend Chinese-financed extractive megaprojects in 2018.[72] These movements

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[68] Sanchez, Emerson, and Jayson Lamchek, "The Year of Daring: Revisiting the Philippine Left's Dalliance with a Strongman," *Melbourne Asia Review* 6 (May 2021). https://doi.org/10.37839/mar2652-550x6.13.

[69] Picq, "Resistance to Extractivism and Megaprojects."

[70] "Indigenous Youth Leadership."

[71] Fraser and Kenny, *Living Indigenous Leadership*, 12-34.

[72] Picq, "Resistance to Extractivism and Megaprojects."

reject market-driven sustainability metrics that ignore human costs, prioritizing instead "relational well-being," a concept emphasizing the quality of relationships among people, communities, and ecosystems rather than individual material accumulation.[73] By centering relationships rather than commodities, connection rather than consumption, and collective flourishing rather than private profit, this alternative metric provides both critique of current development models and vision for postextractive futures grounded in Indigenous cosmovisions and community values.[74]

Electoral strategies such as green voting reveal how grassroots energies reshape political landscapes. They extend the struggles of protest sites into the institutional domain. Degrowth policies, economic frameworks that advocate for reducing material and energy consumption, prioritizing sufficiency and well-being over continuous GDP growth, provoke reflection on what constitutes prosperity.[75] In the Philippines, anti-mining groups launched a "green voting" campaign for the 2025 polls. They urge voters to choose leaders prioritizing environmental and community welfare.[76] This strategy empowers communities to influence governance. It addresses legal pluralism that enables corporate exploitation.[77] In Spain, a "Just Transition Agreement"

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[73] Carola P. Krieg and Reetta Toivanen, eds., *Situating Sustainability* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 234-256.

[74] Krieg and Toivanen, *Situating Sustainability*, 234-256.

[75] Kallis, Giorgos, Vasilis Kostakis, Steffen Lange, Barbara Muraca, Susan Paulson, and Matthias Schmelzer, "Research on Degrowth," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 291–316. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025941; Bengi Akbulut, "Degrowth," *Rethinking Marxism* 33, no. 1 (2021): 98–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2020.1847014.

[76] Ivana Gozum, "Anti-Mining Groups Urge Public to 'Vote Green' in 2025 Polls," *Rappler*, 2025, https://www.rappler.com/philippines/elections/anti-mining-groups-urge-public-vote-green-2025/.

[77] Bornschier and Vogt, "The Politics of Extractivism," 106493.

phased out coal mining, supported affected workers, and invested in impacted municipalities. It boosted the incumbent Socialist Party's vote share in coal-mining areas during the 2019 election.[78] When environmental and social justice movements align, these strategies counteract the ecological and social harms of extractivism.

Integral ecology as a framework for renewal

Integral ecology, as articulated in Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, provides a framework for understanding and addressing extractivism's harms. The encyclical emphasizes that "everything is connected" and that ecological crises cannot be addressed in isolation from social, economic, and spiritual dimensions. *Laudato Si'* critiques a "throwaway culture" that treats both nature and vulnerable people as disposable, calling instead for an "integral ecology" that recognizes the interconnection of environmental degradation with social inequity, spiritual impoverishment, and cultural loss. This framework challenges technocratic paradigms that reduce environmental problems to technical fixes while ignoring underlying structural injustices and ethical failures. As Raluto argues in his ecological theology of liberation, this framework critically appropriates and expands the notion of the preferential option for the poor to privilege those who suffer not only from class oppression, racial

[78] Diane Bolet, Fergus Green, and Mikel González-Eguino. "How to Get Coal Country to Vote for Climate Policy: The Effect of a "Just Transition Agreement" on Spanish Election Results." *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 3 (2024): 1344-1359. doi:10.1017/S0003055423001235

discrimination, and sexist ideologies, but also from ecological exploitation.[79]

This framework underscores the ethical responsibility to listen to marginalized voices. Those who live in sacrifice zones hold insights into the consequences of extractivism. Integral ecology does not impose a uniform model. It encourages dialogue across cultures and faiths. Dialogue also occurs across disciplines. It invites theologians and scientists to collaborate in shaping practices that safeguard life. Community leaders also participate in this collaboration. Integral ecology weaves together spiritual insight and empirical knowledge. It cultivates a vision of sustainability that transcends technocratic fixes and addresses the roots of ecological and social crisis.[80]

Integral ecology unites the resistance strategies examined throughout this paper (community education, place-based action, electoral mobilization, and degrowth policies) into a coherent vision. It views health and ecology as inseparable. Rooted in *Laudato Si'*s call for interconnectedness, it challenges the commodification of nature and people. Integral ecology transforms sacrifice zones into spaces of sacred life by emphasizing care for both people and place. It opposes anthropocentrism and valorizes species other than human beings. This offers a contrast to green extractivism where sustainability promises dissipate when considering environmental

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[79] Reynaldo D. Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015). Cf. also Daniel P. Castillo, "Integral Ecology as a Liberationist Concept," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2016): 353–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916635781.

[80] Johan De Tavernier and Kingsley Ndubueze, "Laudato Si's View on Integral Ecology in Light of the Planetary Boundaries Concept," *New Blackfriars* 101, no. 1096 (April 2020). https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12500.

impacts on fragile ecosystems. The framework understands natural beings as possessing intrinsic value rather than existing as objects. This shared concern for ecosystem protection positions Catholic integral ecology and Indigenous worldviews as allies in defending environments against extractive activities, even when their theological frameworks differ.[81] The Catholic Church's approach to Indigenous cultures through interculturality and Gospel inculturation fosters collaboration. It integrates insights from Indigenous cosmovisions into integral ecology frameworks that can ethically address extractive mining practices. Integral ecology reimagines sustainability as justice-centered and relational.

Conclusion

Resisting extractivism is both a moral and practical necessity. This paper shows how personal experience and collective struggle converge to reveal viable alternatives grounded in an integral ecological framework. Communities create spaces of hope by acknowledging loss while sustaining resilience, showing that sustainability is not a distant ideal but something shaped through daily practices of care and resistance.

The health and environmental harms of extractivism demand urgent collective action. My father's and brother's death exposes the systemic violence of sacrifice zones, while the cases discussed here - from mining protests in Romblon and community health campaigns in Colombia to policy reforms in Spain, and resistance movements in Ecuador - demonstrate how resilience emerges across varied contexts. Together, these cases

[81] Carlos Zepeda, "Integrating the Ethics of Integral Ecologies into Global Environmental Governance," *Journal of Global Ethics* (April 2025): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2025.2491365.

show that extractive harm is global and that possibilities for renewal are widely shared. By linking integral ecology with community-led education, place-based resistance, and policy change, marginalized communities and their allies challenge extractive dominance and articulate justice-centered ways of living with the Earth. In this vision, sacrifice zones are no longer sites of abandonment but places where dignity and ecological repair can emerge through solidarity.

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The Mystery of Divine Predilection and the Preferential Option for the Poor in Matthew 20:1–16

Joenel B. Buencibello

Abstract: This study explores the theological convergence between St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection and Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor in Matthew 20:1–16. Through a comparative analysis, it examines how these seemingly divergent traditions, one rooted in scholastic metaphysics and the other in historical praxis, can be harmonized to illuminate the mystery of divine generosity and justice. The parable of the workers in the vineyard serves as a theological bridge, revealing a God who acts freely and lovingly, beyond human calculations of merit. Drawing from the *Summa Theologiae,* Church Fathers, and modern biblical scholarship, the paper argues that divine predilection and preferential love for the poor are not contradictory but complementary expressions of God. This synthesis offers a renewed understanding of divine love that is both metaphysical and historical, transcendent and immanent, and invites a deeper engagement with Scripture in the context of contemporary poverty and injustice.

Keywords: Divine Predilection • Liberation Theology • Matthew 20:1–16 • Preferential Option for the Poor • Scholastic Theology • *Summa Theologiae*

Introduction

God provides equal attention to all individuals,[1] not due to an equal distribution of blessings, but rather because God manages all aspects of existence with equal intelligence and benevolence.[2] Following that same intelligence and benevolence, God can distribute blessings

I dedicate this article to all the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), Missionary Sisters of Mary (MSM), and Notre Dame de Sion (NDS) sisters in the Philippines and around the world.

[1] Wisdom 6:8.

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 20, a. 3.

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unequally. This claim will be clarified through a study of the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Mt. 20:1–16) via the theological and philosophical perspectives of St. Thomas Aquinas' mystery of *predilection* and liberation theology's *preferential option for the poor*.

The parable describes the Kingdom of Heaven as follows:

> For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now, when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1-16; NRSV Catholic Edition)

Matthew 20:1–16 has generated diverse interpretations of justice, merit, and the nature of the kingdom of heaven. This study is undertaken to clarify the seemingly polarized understanding of the Love of God, whether conceived primarily as immanent, manifesting in historical solidarity with the poor, or as transcendent, rooted in metaphysical divine predilection. The parable is employed not primarily as exegetical evidence, but as an illustrative example of the emergence of God's glory and mercy, revealing both the immanence and transcendence of divine love through the willful and free act of loving the poor.

Gaining insight into the divine manifestation of preferential love is a means to appreciate God, not through attributing human characteristics to the divine, but by recognizing and valuing God's fundamental nature—love. It seeks to shed light on an anthropological conundrum regarding the comprehension of God's benevolence and compassion within the framework of the contrasting lived experiences of the wealthy and the impoverished.

Methodology

Through a comparative theological analysis, this study looks at how the scholastic theology of divine predilection and liberation theology's preferential option for the poor harmonize together and serve as hermeneutic lenses to making sense of Matthew 20:1-16. However, it is recognizable that there are areas in Thomistic theology and liberation theology that can be identified as unique and may not actually share the same appreciation of realities.[3] Nevertheless, the intersection

[3] For example, the *Summa* says that the public authority may lawfully execute criminals if their continued life is dangerous to the community. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 64, a.

of these two theological schools of thought centers on Sacred Scripture. Both the *Summa* and liberation theology have the Sacred Scriptures as their wellspring of meaning and object of interpretation.

It is undeniable that, although they articulate some aspects of faith such as God's transcendence (ontological) in Thomistic theology and God's immanence (historical) in liberation theology, they both share the same faith expressions found in Tradition and Sacred Scriptures. To clarify this argument, liberation theology has often been affirmed as an orthodox theology rooted in the orthopraxis of the Church,[4] however, it is important to recognize that the Magisterium has raised the issue of differences between the various strands of liberation theologies.[5] Certain expressions, influenced by Marxist analysis and class struggle, were critiqued in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Libertatis*

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2. On the contrary, liberation theology is generally opposed to the death penalty due to its commitment to critique of structural violence and solidarity with victims. See Vincent W. Lloyd, "Political Theology of Abolitionism: Beyond the Death Penalty," *Political Theology* 19, no. 2 (2018): 120-136, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2018.1440161.

[4] Segundo Galilea rightly affirms that liberation theology is "an orthodox theology whose critical reflection rests on the orthopraxis of the Church and of Christians." Yet this affirmation must be nuanced. Kindly refer to Segundo Galilea, "The Theology of Liberation, A General Survey," in *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document*, ed. Alberto Rossa (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1984), 36.

[5] The Church's Magisterium, particularly through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Libertatis nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis conscientia* (1986), [see complete citation in proceeding footnotes] distinguished between two strands of liberation theologies. One strand, represented by figures such as Ernesto Cardenal, Hugo Assmann, and partially Jon Sobrino, incorporated elements of Marxist analysis, class struggle, and even revolutionary violence.

nuntius[6] and *Libertatis conscientia*,[7] as they show tendencies that allegedly risked orthodoxy.[8]

By contrast, the strand that evolved into the

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[6] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation" (Libertatis nuntius)*, August 6, 1984, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html

[7] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation (Libertatis conscientia)*, March 22, 1986, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html

[8] In his work *El Evangelio en Solentiname*, 4 vols. (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1975–1977), Ernesto Cardenal made Gospel reflections with Nicaraguan peasants, explicitly linking Christian faith to revolutionary struggle. He even made *In Cuba* (New York: New Directions, 1972), a sympathetic account of Cuba's socialist revolution, blending Christian and Marxist ideals. Additionally, Hugo Assmann frames theology as inseparable from revolutionary praxis, heavily influenced by Marxist analysis. See *Teología desde la praxis de liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973). And the early articulation of liberation theology, emphasizing class struggle and structural critique of capitalism is found in *Teología de la liberación* (Montevideo: Centro de Documentación, 1970). Furthermore, Jon Sobrino's works, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978) and *Jesús el Liberador: Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1991) were also partially criticized by the Vatican by presenting Christology in dialogue with Latin American revolutionary context that emphasized Jesus as liberator of the oppressed, for downplaying Christ's divinity. However, in the later part of this article, I will be utilizing his work entitled, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), to discuss God (as Love) and his work (loving) in action as embodied by the Heart of Christ who loved with a human heart. The human Jesus, himself poor and belonging to the marginalized sector of his time (cf. Luke 4:18; Philippians 2:7), offers a concrete and exemplary model in which divine predilection and the preferential option for the poor converge into a unified reality, embodied in the lived experience of the oppressed.

"Theology of the People," represented by Lucio Gera,[9] Juan Carlos Scannone,[10] and Pope Francis,[11] was affirmed as orthodox and continues to inspire a path of holiness through solidarity with the poor.[12] This theological project follows this particular line of tradition.

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[9] Lucio Gera, an Argentine Catholic priest and theologian, in his work, *La teología de la liberación y la teología del pueblo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Criterio, 1973), emphasized the "pueblo" (people) as the locus of God's action, highlighting culture, faith, and history rather than Marxist class struggle. His writings shaped the Argentine strand of liberation theology. And in *El pueblo de Dios y la historia* (1970s, collected essays), Gera insists that liberation must be rooted in ecclesial life and tradition.

[10] Juan Carlos Scannone, a Jesuit priest and Argentine theologian, in *Evangelización, cultura y teología* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1990), examines the relationship between evangelization and culture, grounding liberation theology in pastoral praxis. Furthermore, in *La teología del pueblo: Raíces teológicas del Papa Francisco* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sal Terrae, 2014), Scannone systematizes the Theology of the People, showing how it influenced Pope Francis. He stresses inculturation, solidarity, and holiness rather than ideological struggle.

[11] Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), in *Evangelii gaudium* (Apostolic Exhortation, 2013), outlines the Church's mission of joy-filled evangelization, with strong emphasis on the poor, social justice, and mercy. Seen as the mature fruit of Theology of the People. And in *Fratelli tutti* (Encyclical, 2020), he develops themes of fraternity, solidarity, and social friendship, continuing the trajectory of liberation theology in a pastoral key.

[12] This strand is fully orthodox, deeply rooted in Tradition, and offers a path to holiness by emphasizing God's preferential love for the poor in a way that harmonizes with the Church's teaching. The *Teología del Pueblo* (Theology of the People) is an Argentine strand of Liberation Theology that emphasizes the faith, culture, and lived experience of ordinary people as the privileged place where God acts. It roots liberation in popular religiosity, solidarity, and pastoral praxis.

Status Quaestionis

Can the scholastic theology of Divine Predilection be used alongside Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor to better understand Matthew 20:1-16 in relation to our context today?

On Scholastic and Liberation Theology

The stereotyping of theological disciplines into rigid categories, perceived as irreconcilable with contemporary ones, often plagues scholastic theology. The *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, is frequently dismissed as an outdated and overly theocentric resource, detached from human suffering and incapable of providing a critical framework for addressing social miseries.[13] On the other hand, liberation theology is stereotypically reduced to an anthropocentric option for the poor, grounded in a low Christology that risks postponing the recognition of Christ's divinity in favor of a politicized Jesus. These stereotypes foster the assumption that scholastic theology, with its supposedly apolitical orientation, and liberation theology, with its radically political stance, exist in absolute methodological opposition.[14]

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[13] Michael J. Dodds, "Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love," *Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (1991): 330–44; Michael J. DeValve, "A Theory of Suffering and Healing: Toward a Loving Justice," *Critical Criminology* 31 (2023): 35–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-022-09667-4; Also in Marika Rose, "The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (September 2013; online 2024): 540–551, https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12016.

[14] The intellectual articulation of faith was a pastoral demand in St. Thomas Aquinas' time. See in Bernard McGinn, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7-9, 16-17. On the other hand, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff said, *"Liberation theology was born when faith*

The persistence of such dichotomization into theocentrism and anthropocentrism raises the question of whether these stances are methodological absolutes. Is it not possible, however, to place scholastic theology and liberation theology in dialogue in order to maximize their respective strengths for interpreting the faith, especially the Sacred Scripture's testimonies/narratives, and to allow the Word of God to speak meaningfully in today's context of poverty and injustice? This theological inquiry aims to investigate how the resources of the *Summa Theologiae* and liberation theology can be integrated to enhance our understanding of both God and humanity in relation to love, specifically focusing on divine predilection and the preferential option for the poor as experienced in the lived realities.

On theological appropriations of divine predilection and preferential option arguments

The *preferential option for the poor* emerged in Latin American liberation theology throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, as theologians sought to articulate God's concern for the impoverished as fundamental to the Christian faith. Gustavo Gutiérrez articulated the concept as a theological commitment grounded in Scripture and in Jesus' ministry: God's saving love is revealed through solidarity with the marginalized, making the option for the poor an essential dimension of discipleship, not a sociological add-on.[15]

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confronted the injustice done to the poor." Read Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 3. Here we can sense the polarity of the two theological school of thought.

[15] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Option for the Poor Arises from Faith in Christ," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009).

The idea was officially accepted by the Latin American bishops at Medellín in 1968, and Puebla in 1979, and it was slowly added to Catholic social doctrine. Later writers, such as Daniel G. Groody and Charles M. A. Clark, expanded its implications for global justice, development policy, and economics.[16] Recent research, notably Stephen J. McKinney's investigations into Catholic education, use the choice as a framework for institutional practice and ethical contemplation.[17] Modern study has expanded the notion to encompass globalization, ecology, and decolonial issues, while preserving its theological essence: an imperative to perceive the world through the lens of the impoverished. The preferential option for the poor thus continues to act as both a theological concept and a moral necessity defining Christian ethics and social involvement.

The relative absence of academic studies connecting St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection with Liberation Theology can be attributed to several theological and methodological factors. First, the two traditions begin from different starting points. Aquinas' discussion of divine predilection is rooted in scholastic metaphysics, emphasizing God's eternal will and causality. For Aquinas, God's love is the cause of all goodness in creatures; God loves some more than others not because of merit, but because love itself gives being

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[16] Daniel G. Groody, ed., *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Charles M. A. Clark, "Development Policy and the Poor, Part 2: Preferential Option for the Poor," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 80, no. 4 (2021): 1131–1154, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12425.

[17] Stephen J. McKinney, "Applied Catholic Social Teaching: Preferential Option for the Poor and Catholic Schools," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 23, no. 1 (2023): 31–47. https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/290919/1/290919.pdf.

and grace.[18] Liberation Theology, on the other hand, arises from historical praxis and a concern for social justice, focusing on God's preferential option for the poor as a concrete expression of divine love in history.[19] Consequently, while Aquinas' notion of divine predilection is ontological and eternal, Liberation Theology's emphasis is historical and socio-ethical, creating a conceptual gap between metaphysical causality and historical liberation.

Furthermore, the historical development and disciplinary separation of Thomism and Liberation Theology have contributed to this divide. Neo-Thomism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often associated with ecclesial authority and speculative theology, while Liberation Theology emerged as a movement of critique against social and institutional injustice within both Church and society.[20] Because of this, liberation theologians rarely engaged Aquinas directly, preferring sources from Scripture, critical theory, and social analysis over scholastic metaphysics. When Aquinas is referenced, it is typically in relation to ethics, creation, or grace, rather than divine predilection. The doctrine's speculative character makes it less immediately useful for the praxis-oriented concerns of Liberation Theology.

Recent theologians such as Levering and Torrell suggest that Aquinas' understanding of divine love could still offer valuable insights for liberationist thought. Aquinas' teaching that God's love actively brings creatures into participation with divine goodness could serve as a metaphysical foundation for the Liberationist

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18 *Summa Theologiae* I, 20, 3.

19 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

20 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978).

claim that God acts preferentially for the oppressed—not as exclusion, but as a manifestation of divine generosity and justice.[21] However, this possible synthesis remains largely unexplored, leaving a significant opportunity for future theological dialogue between scholastic metaphysics and liberation praxis.

A theological reading of Matthew 20:1-16 according to some Church Fathers

The Church Fathers approached Matthew 20:1–16 with allegorical and pastoral emphases. John Chrysostom and Origen interpreted the parable as salvation history, reading the hours as successive ages of the world and the denarius as the gift of eternal life.[22]

> The landowner desires, therefore, to give the denarius—that is, salvation—even to those who are last as also to the first, since it is appropriate for him to do what he desires with those who are his own, and he reproves the person who has an evil eye because the landowner is good. Many of the last, therefore, will be first, and certain of those called first will be last, for "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).[23]

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[21] Matthew Levering, *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

[22] Justin M. Gohl, *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew, Book 15: An English Translation (Revised 2023)*, 45-57. https://www.academia.edu/31581897/Origen_of_Alexandrias_Commentary_on_Matthew_Book_15_An_English_Translation_Revised_2023. Hereafter: *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew,* followed by page numbers.

[23] *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew*, 56.

Furthermore, Chrysostom emphasized the pastoral dimension, applying the parable to late converts and warning against envy among the faithful.[24]

> But the question is this, whether the first having gloriously approved themselves, and having pleased God, and having throughout the whole day shone by their labors, are possessed by the basest feeling of vice, jealousy and envy. For when they had seen them enjoying the same rewards, they say, "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, that have borne the burden and heat of the day." And in these words, when they are to receive no hurt, neither to suffer diminution as to their own hire, they were indignant, and much displeased at the good of others, which was proof of envy and jealousy. And what is yet more, the good man of the house in justifying himself with respect to them, and in making his defense to him that had said these things, convicts him of wickedness and the basest jealousy, saying, "Didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto the last even as unto thee. Is thine eye evil, because I am good?"[25]

Augustine drew the same pastoral lesson but mapped the hours onto stages of human life, showing that even latecomers to faith can receive the same eternal reward.[26]

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[24] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew,* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* Series I, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1888), https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.html. Hereafter cited as *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, followed by page numbers.*

[25] *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 682.

[26] Augustine, *Sermons 51–94*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992), 410-411. https://wesleyscholar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Augustine-Sermons-51-94.pdf. Hereafter: *Sermons 51–94,* followed by page numbers.

This reflection is evident in his famous quote from the *Confessions*, 'late have I loved you, Lord.'

> Those who begin to be Christians almost as soon as they emerge from the womb are called, you could say, first thing in the morning; children, at nine o'clock; young people at noon; at three o'clock the middle aged; at five o'clock broken down old crocks; and yet they are all going to receive the same ten dollars of eternal life.[27]

Across the Fathers, allegorical, pastoral interpretation, and a focus on God's generosity are central. The Scholastic tradition integrated Patristic insights into systematic theology. Thomas Aquinas employed the parable in his account of eternal reward: the denarius signifies the beatific vision, which is equally shared by all the blessed, while differing degrees of accidental glory reflect distinctions of merit.[28] His *Catena Aurea* further demonstrates his use of patristic authorities in harmonizing diverse interpretations into a coherent theological synthesis.[29] Scholastic readings thus preserved the Fathers' pastoral concerns while refining them through precise theological categories.

Modern scholarship departs from allegory to focus on historical, literary, and socio-economic dimensions. France highlights the parable's role within Matthew's narrative, stressing God's generosity over human

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[27] *Sermons 51–94,* 411.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 109, a. 3; II–II, q. 129, a. 4, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), https://www.newadvent.org/summa/.

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, trans. John Henry Newman (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 664–668. Also accessible through digital version in, Catena Aurea by Thomas Aquinas, Chap. 20 (20:1–16), accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.ecatholic2000.com/catena/untitled-27.shtml.

calculation of reward.[30] Davies and Allison give detailed exegesis, identifying the last-first reversal as the central theme.[31] Luz emphasizes the parable's rhetorical function within Matthew's community, which challenges expectations about divine recompense.[32] Keener interprets the landowner's actions against the backdrop of first-century wage practices, noting how they disrupt social norms.[33] Van Eck sharpens this socio-historical angle by presenting the landowner as an unconventional patron who violates Mediterranean honor-shame expectations.[34] Eubank reassesses the theological dimension of recompense, arguing that the parable maintains both God's justice and generosity.[35]

The contrast between traditions is clear. Patristic and Scholastic readings move quickly from the parable's details to allegorical and theological meaning, while modern interpreters emphasize Matthew's narrative design and the historical context of labor relations.[36] Yet, as we argue in this paper, all traditions converge on the

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[30] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

[31] W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Vol. 3 (19–28)*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

[32] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

[33] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

[34] Ernest van Eck, "An Unexpected Patron: A Social-Scientific and Realistic Reading of the Parable of the Vineyard Labourers (Mt 20:1–15)," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2015): 1–15.

[35] Nicholas Eubank, "What Does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense? On the Misuse of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1–16)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35, no. 3 (2013): 242–262.

[36] Other studies were used to corroborate the points of this paper in the discussions, along with contemporary and patristic writings.

conviction that the parable demonstrates divine predilection, generosity, giving equal opportunity to all, and undermines envy, even as their methods and emphases differ.

The 'Kingdom' of 'God'

In chapter 20:1–16, Matthew employs the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" (*basileia tōn ouranōn*) rather than "Kingdom of God" (*basileía toû theoû*), a distinctive feature of his Gospel. Most scholars agree that this preference reflects Matthew's sensitivity to his primarily Jewish-Christian audience. Within Jewish tradition, the divine name was treated with profound reverence, and circumlocutions such as "Heaven" were commonly used as substitutes for "God." By using "Kingdom of Heaven," Matthew thus demonstrates respect for Jewish piety while referring to the same reality that Mark and Luke describe as the "Kingdom of God." As Richard Thomas France notes, Matthew's usage is "best explained by Jewish sensitivities about using the divine name," though it conveys no difference in meaning from "Kingdom of God."[37] Ulrich Luz similarly argues that the term underscores both Jewish reverential practice and the transcendent origin of the kingdom, which "comes from heaven and breaks into history through Jesus' ministry."[38] Donald Hagner concurs, emphasizing that in Matthew 20:1–16 the phrase is functionally identical to "Kingdom of God" but shaped by Matthew's awareness of his audience's religious sensibilities.[39] Thus, Matthew's

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[37] Richard Thomas France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 750.

[38] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 540.

[39] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 562.

distinctive terminology serves both theological and cultural purposes: it preserves reverence for God's name while simultaneously highlighting the kingdom's divine source. In this paper, the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" will be treated as synonyms.

When analyzed systematically, the concept of the *Kingdom of God* may be understood through three interrelated dimensions: the reality of God, the nature of the kingdom as governance or reign, and the identity of its subjects or citizens. These elements are not merely components but constitutive aspects of the whole. The Kingdom presupposes the existence of God as its source and sovereign; without God, the very foundation of the Kingdom disintegrates. Likewise, "kingdom" entails an active reign or governance that reflects God's will manifested in history, rather than simply a static realm or territory. Finally, the subjects or citizens are indispensable, for the Kingdom is realized in a community that participates in and embodies divine justice, peace, and love.[40] If any of these dimensions is absent, the integrity of the concept collapses, reducing it to either an abstract ideal or an incomplete theological construct. Some liberation theologians echo this three-part structure in their works. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that the coming Kingdom involves divine sovereignty, social governance, and active human participation, particularly of the poor.[41] Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann

[40] In Mitzi Minor's article, he argued that in the gospel of Mark, "Jesus did more than proclaim the arrival of God's Kingdom; he lived it. He practiced his spirituality." This presupposes that Jesus is not only a messenger of the Kingdom of God that is "at hand," but he too is a citizen of that same kingdom he is describing. See Mitzi Minor, "Living the Kingdom of God: The Communal and Renewing Spirituality of Jesus in Mark," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023): 1096, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091096.

[41] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 37; 122-123.

underscores that the doctrine of God (or the reality of God), the reign of Christ, and the eschatological community are inseparable in understanding what "Kingdom of God" means.[42]

Furthermore, speaking about the notion of "God" in the "kingdom of God," liberation theology presents God not primarily in metaphysical terms, but as the God of life, justice, and liberation. According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, God's very nature is revealed in historical action, especially in siding with the poor and oppressed. This is expressed through the "preferential option for the poor," meaning God shows partiality toward the marginalized to restore justice.[43] Rather than seeing God as distant or neutral, liberation theology insists that God is intimately involved in human struggles, embodying love in action.[44] Christ is understood as the liberator who identifies with the suffering, and thus the meaning of God becomes inseparable from the call to praxis: faith must lead to transforming unjust structures. As Michael Minch notes, the image of God in liberation theology is intrinsically tied to the pursuit of justice, freedom, and

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[42] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 112-128.

[43] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973; rev. ed., 1988). This foundational text introduces liberation theology and emphasizes God's historical involvement in human liberation. Gutiérrez frames God as the one who hears the cry of the oppressed and calls for praxis [action rooted in faith] to transform unjust structures. This positions God's nature as inseparable from the struggle for justice and freedom.

[44] In *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 25-70, Gutiérrez directly addresses the question of God's nature. He presents God as the "God of life," whose being is revealed through solidarity with the poor and whose meaning is understood in the fight against death-dealing forces such as poverty, injustice, and violence. God is portrayed as the source and sustainer of life, acting in history to liberate.

the affirmation of human dignity.[45] Yet St. Irenaeus of Lyons famously stated: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God" (or similar phrasing like "man's life is the vision of God"),[46] emphasizing that God's glory is revealed as humans flourish in Christ, fully embracing their created potential and experiencing God's presence. This core teaching highlights that humanity's fulfillment, not its diminished state, brings glory to God, a key idea in his defense of the Incarnation against Gnostic views that downplayed the physical.

God is portrayed as the God of life, justice, and liberation, whose preferential option for the poor underscores divine solidarity with the oppressed.[47] Yet when this theological portrait is placed in dialogue with Matthew 20:1–16, certain limitations emerge. In this parable, God is symbolized by the landowner who distributes wages equally, regardless of hours worked. From a liberationist perspective, this imagery may appear problematic, since the landowner's actions provoke dissatisfaction among those who labored longer, raising questions about fairness and consideration for effort. Whereas liberation theology emphasizes God's restorative justice aimed at uplifting the marginalized, Matthew's parable shifts the focus to divine generosity and the overturning of human expectations of merit. As R. T. France observes, the parable critiques "human

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[45] Michael Minch, "Liberation Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 634–37.

[46] "*Gloria Dei vivens homo; vita autem hominis visio Dei",* Ireneaus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), Book IV, Chapter 20, Paragraph 7 (AH 4, 20, 7).

[47] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973; rev. ed., 1988), xx; Michael Minch, "Liberation Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Global Justice*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 635.

notions of fairness" by presenting God's rule as radically generous rather than calculative.[48] Ulrich Luz similarly explains that the landowner's action demonstrates God's sovereignty and freedom to dispense grace apart from human standards of justice.[49] Donald Hagner notes that the parable's tension lies precisely in this reversal, where the "equality" established is not about distributive fairness but an eschatological sign of God's unmerited favor.[50] Thus, the limitation of liberation theology in relation to this passage lies in its potential to under-emphasize the parable's radical teaching on divine sovereignty and unmerited grace, which cannot be reduced to categories of socio-political justice.

On the other hand, if we try to understand the notion of God in the scholastic tradition, we will find a strong emphasis on transcendence. God is beyond change, passion, or temporal process.[51] This notion somehow will aid us in understanding the attitude of the landowner in the parable given to us by Jesus, according to Matthew (20:1-16).

On Divine Predilection: "I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you."[52]

Predilection is usually construed as special preference or favor. For instance, when it comes to apparel, we may already have particular preferences about style,

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[48] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 750.

[49] Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 540.

[50] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28, Word Biblical Commentary,* vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 562.

[51] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, *Prima Pars*, q.3–q.11, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 27–50.

[52] Matthew 20:14 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

color, fit, and linen types. Therefore, entering a store would include actively seeking out these items rather than engaging in random browsing and wasting time. On the other hand, favoritism is defined as treating some individuals or things more favorably than others, thus relating to bias, prejudice, and nonobjectivity in contrast with fairness, prudence, and objectivity.[53] Favoritism can be admiration and amiable feelings or inclination towards others caused by some filial or amorous relations (such as in the case of nepotism), benefits (such as in the case of bribery), and passion (such as in the case of infatuation). In simple words, favoritism is a phenomenon between the object of favor and the favoring subject, where the object directly or indirectly influences the subject to favor it. Therefore, the term "favoritism" will not be used as an alternative for "predilection" throughout this paper. In St. Thomas Aquinas, the mystery of predilection is about God exhibiting a particular predilection or favor to some creatures according to God's will. God's attitude toward these people is not based on any trait that makes them deserving of divine affection; instead, God's decisions result from volition or free will.[54] God's predilection is fair, prudent, and objective simply because the act of favoring is based on God's own will, independent of any qualifications from the receiver of the favor, in contrast with the qualifications of the other potential receiver of the favor (as in a competition). God wills the good, not because the object of favor deserves it, but because God is good.

> God is the *summum bonum*, possessor and possessed in one act; all that is desirable he has and is in an infinite degree. Being in want of nothing, he has fruition of

[53] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Favoritism," accessed January 8, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/favoritism.

[54] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 20, a. 3.

> himself and desires nothing out of selfishness. If he diffuses good (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) then that good redounds to the credit of finite beings and makes for finite excellence; it cannot add anything to what is already personified goodness.[55]

In his argument on God's goodness, St. Thomas Aquinas mentioned an objection, saying that goodness seems unsuitable for God because mode, species, and order are good. However, God is vast and unordered, so these do not belong to God. Thus, God is not good.[56] St. Thomas answered this objection by saying that to have mode, species, and order is the essence of created-good (or caused good), yet good is in God as in its cause; therefore, God can impose these on others.[57] For instance, Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, remarkably conceived a son despite having passed the prime of her reproductive years and being childless. Her child was named John, the "baptizer," eventually heralding Christ's coming. Elizabeth was not a supernatural being or a prerequisite for human salvation; instead, she was an ordinary elderly woman who had never given birth and was the wife of a devout priest. Figuratively, nothing exceptional about her could have persuaded the divine mind to elect her as deserving of the favor she received. One could argue that God chose Elizabeth to receive such favor because Zechariah was a priest. But why would God make Zechariah mute if God's favor to him was what brought about Elizabeth's favor? God chose her not because she deserved it or had good character to merit that favor, but because God willed it. Following the words of Elizabeth we can appreciate that the act of favoring is to exercise

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[55] Martin Cyril D'Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1954), 103-104.

[56] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q. 6, Art. 1, arg. 1.

[57] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.6, Art. 1, ad. 1.

God's compassion with her; *"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."*[58]

Deus Caritas est (God is love). Love motivates and activates God's will as a single act. Furthermore, according to St. Thomas, God's love is not a passion but an act, and God loves everything equally through a single act of will. Yet, similar to how we may love certain individuals more when we desire greater good for them, so too with God. Everything has inherent goodness because of God's love, so nothing would be more valuable than anything else unless God loved it more.[59] This gives us room to understand the mystery of predilection. In Question 20 of *Summa Theologiae*, Article 4, *Whether God loves more better things?* St. Thomas cited an objection, saying that angels are superior to humankind, yet God favored mortals above angels. Thus, God does not always love more the better things.[60] But St. Thomas insisted that "God loves more the better things."[61] He answered the objection by saying,

> God loves the human nature assumed by the Word of God in the person of Christ more than He loves all the angels; for that nature is better… But speaking of human nature in general, and comparing it with the angelic, the two are found equal, in the order of grace and of glory… But as to natural condition, an angel is better than a man. God therefore did not assume human nature because He loved man, absolutely speaking, more; *but because the needs of man were greater*; just as the master of a house may give some

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[58] Luke 1:25 (New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

[59] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, edited by Timothy McDermott (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989), 54.

[60] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, arg. 2.

[61] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, co.

> costly delicacy to a sick servant, that he does not give to his own son in sound health.[62]

From the answer of St. Thomas, we learned that God made both angels and human beings equal "in the order of grace and glory." However, in the natural order, angels are better than men. Regardless, God showed his predilection for human beings through *mercy*, which is a greater good. This corresponds with what Pope Francis said during the Angelus of July 14, 2019, as he addressed the pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square about the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable he described as a *treasure*. He said, *"Mercy towards a human life in a state of need is the true face of love."* Pope Francis stated that becoming a true disciple of Jesus involves loving others, and that through this love, the face of God is shown. St. Thomas Aquinas and Pope Francis, in some sense, give us a context of what it means to be "merciful, just as your Father is merciful,"[63] and that mercy is a manifestation of love mediated as an act of will. Mercy is the fruition of God's will according to his wisdom and love. In St. Thomas, it is good of God to give perfections, fair that they are spread out evenly, generous that they are given out of kindness rather than to get something in return, and *merciful* that they are used to relieve needs. According to St. Thomas, if someone owed you one pound and you gave them two pounds out of your own pocket, you were not being unfair; you were being kind and generous instead. If you forgive someone for a crime or forgive a loan, that is also a form of giving. St. Thomas

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[62] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 4, ad. 2. Emphasis added.

[63] Linda Bordoni, "Pope Francis: 'Mercy Is the True Face of Love,'" Vatican News, July 14, 2019, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-07/pope-angelus-catechesis-good-samaritan-mercy.html.

said that *charity* does not go against justice, but rather completes it. God is fair because God is merciful, for nothing a creature owes is due to something it already is or will be because of God's goodness.[64] God's goodness is the cause of everything a person has, is, and will be.

The parable's historical significance lies in its placement within the framework of Jesus' conversation with the Scribes and Pharisees in chapter 19 of the gospel of Matthew. It explains Jesus' connection with the outcast and symbolizes the unrestricted bestowal of God's mercy.[65] Now, there are three hermeneutical keys to understanding the parable. First, the landowner keeps looking for laborers for the field. The landowner went out early in the morning, at midmorning, noontime, and mid-afternoon, and before the sunset. The second key is that the ones who had been hired first expected to be paid more than the ones who had been hired after them. The third key will be that of the ones who were hired last and worked for fewer hours yet received the same remuneration as the first ones.

Exegetical scholarship confirms that the themes of labor justice, divine predilection, and the preferential option for the poor are valid hermeneutical keys for interpreting Matthew 20:1–16. The parable unfolds in three episodes that together reveal the mystery of God's predilection. First, the hiring of laborers throughout the day (verses 1–7) underscores God's initiative in seeking out those left idle and excluded, a sign of divine love that does not abandon the marginalized.[66] Second, the equal

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[64] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, Edited by Timothy McDermott (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1989), 55.

[65] Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1-16," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

[66] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1996), 95–97.

payment of all workers (verses 8–10) manifests God's justice as generosity, affirming the dignity of each laborer regardless of human calculations of merit or productivity.[67] Finally, the complaint of the first laborers and the master's response (verses. 11–16) discloses the mystery of predilection: God's freedom to love and bless the poor in ways that overturn human expectations of fairness.[68] In this way, the parable becomes a theological icon of the preferential option for the poor, showing that God's kingdom is not built on strict equivalence but on gratuitous love that privileges the marginalized.[69]

Landowner: Greedy or generous?

Upon initial examination, the landowner appeared to exhibit a sense of urgency in recruiting additional laborers to expedite the process of harvesting. His desperation caused him to go out for almost the entire day. A scholar questions the rationale behind the landowner's decision to hire people in fragmented increments rather than employing the entire workforce simultaneously. The workers who were hired at noon and in the late afternoon probably spent the entire day at the marketplace pleading with any landowners who showed up. The varying hiring hours may also indicate that the decision to hire or not was within the control of the landowner, as boss, given his authority over the financial affairs. The landowner views the workers as a means of achieving the production goals rather than as being

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[67] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 37–39.

[68] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 178–80.

[69] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 32–35.

inherently significant.[70] Certain scholars provide an alternative approach to interpreting the passage, advocating for an economic perspective and specifically focusing on the analysis of the equitable remuneration provided to all workers.[71] If we look at the activity of the landowner alone, outside of his intentions, we will see the landowner's desperation to expand his labor force to triple production and his imprudent financial practices as greed.

On the other hand, the Church Fathers associated the landowner with God and Christ, who worked to establish a new system of justice. [72] The words of the landowner in Matthew 20:14–15 support this interpretation: *"Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"* Here, the landowner intends to give generously what he has and not merely find workers to advance his gains. St. Cyril of Alexandria believed that when the Master generously rewarded the last workers while treating them equally to those who arrived first, God's justice displayed His glory.[73] While St. John

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[70] Lilly Phiri, "God's World Is Not an 'Animal Farm', or Is It?: Re-Reading Matthew 20:1–16in the Face of Workplace Economic Injustices," essay, in *Bible and Theology from the Underside of Empire*, ed. Vuyani Vellem, Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, and Philip Vinod Peacock (African Sun Media, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nzg057, 165–166.

[71] Shinji Takagi, "The Rich Young Man and the Boundary of Distributive Justice: An Economics Reading of Matthew 20:1–16," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (November 3, 2020): 207–15, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107920958999.

[72] Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History,* Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 122.

[73] Cyril of Alexandria, 'Fragmenta in Matthaeum,' in Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche (ed. J. Reuss; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 226,229; and Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole,

Chrysostom emphasized the concept of God's free will in distributing justice, as highlighted in Matthew 20:14, *"I choose to give to these last as I give to you."*[74] It is why St. Gregory the Great can confidently assert that we should all be extremely joyful, even if we are the last in the kingdom of God.[75] For instance, the repentant thief who was crucified beside Jesus, despite leading an immoral life, received the same reward promised by Jesus to the apostles: eternal life in paradise. We may also consider the reward given by Jesus to the repentant thief as parallel to that of the landowner calling some workers at the last hours to receive the same price promised to those who were elected to work earlier in the field.

The first workers and the last

It is said that Jesus' teachings explicitly emphasize the priority of the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" over all others. Let us consider the *Beatitudes* as evidence from the sermon on the mount. It appears that Jesus primarily focuses on what is referred to as the "humanitarian" dimension of the law. Realizing

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"Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 122.

[74] John Chrysostom, 'Homiliae in Matthaeum 64.3,' in *PG 58* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Brepols, 1862), 613; and in Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1-16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

[75] Gregory the Great, 'XL Homiliarum in Evangelica,' in *PL 76* (ed. J.P. Migne; Paris: Brepols, 1857), 1156–1157; Cyril of Alexandria, 'Fragmenta in Matthaeum,' 226, 229; Gregory the Great, 'XL Homiliarum in Evangelica,' 613; M. Simonetti, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament. Matthew 14–28 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 106–112; and in Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 123.

this entails embodying holiness, perfection, and mercy.[76] The personal good and interests of the first workers clouded their minds to comprehend the will (both intention and action) of their master, resulting in demanding more benefits than the last workers. They seemed to lack compassion, which is a key element in loving the neighbor. Putting themselves at the forefront of 'desiring the good' obstructed their eyes from seeing others as their neighbors.

On the other hand, the final workers have no reason to be proud of what they have done because they cannot counter the grievances of the first workers, as they are aware that they are not deserving of such compensation. They felt small. They were silent. Their only source of bravery is the landowner's will to ensure that they receive equal compensation as the first workers. When the landowner asked them, *"Why are you standing here idle all day?"* They said, *"Because no one has hired us."* These last workers were not favored by the other masters and represented those who lacked necessities, such as food, clothing, shelter, basic health care, elementary education, and work—or simply the poor.[77] The landowner's predilection is evident.

On Preferential Option for the Poor: "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."[78]

If there is one thing we must remember while reading

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[76] Roger Ruston, "A Christian View of Justice," *New Blackfriars* 59, no. 699 (August 1978): 344–58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43246907, 347.

[77] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 46-47.

[78] Matthew 20:1 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

Matthew 20:1–16, it is the *kingdom of heaven*. Upon careful examination of the landowner's mindset, we can sense an arduous predilection to share the benefits of the land with the people outside the field. The landowner's act of reaching out indicates an intense exercise of the will to search for those in need of salvation or liberation from impoverishment. Jesus refers to the landowner as a representation of the kingdom of heaven. However, other factors can divert our attention away from the main subject, such as the suggested titles of the parable, namely "Parable of the Workers" and "Workers of the Eleventh Hour."[79] Both exclude the landowner as the main subject suitable to portray the kingdom of heaven. Jesus used the metaphor of a "landowner" to describe the kingdom of heaven. He said, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first," which establishes the context for the *preferential option for the poor*. The concept of the preferential option for the poor encompasses a framework for understanding societal dynamics, fosters ethical considerations, and advocates for approaches centered on self-determination and empowerment.[80] But, for most liberation theologians, the notion of an option for the poor is firmly grounded in the Bible, which demonstrates that God occasionally exhibits an intentional inclination toward individuals who are impoverished, vulnerable, or marginalized.[81] For instance, the Exodus story tells us

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[79] J. Dupont, 'Les ouvriers de la onzième heure. Mt 20,1-16,' *AS 56* (1974), 16–27; and in Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, "Beyond Just Wages: An Intercultural Analysis of Matthew 20:1–16," *Journal of Early Christian History* 4, no. 1 (2014), 113.

[80] Kenneth R. Himes, *101 Questions & Answers on Catholic Social Teachings*, 2nd Edition (Makati City, Philippines: St. Pauls, 2014), 42–43.

[81] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 287–306; Elsa Tamez, The Bible of the Oppressed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,

about the suffering of the Israelites from enslavement in Egypt. Israel's liberator, YHWH, through Moses, led them to the promised land to establish their independence. For the Israelites, this holds a political and religious significance: it represents the encounter with God who rescues and liberates people from the oppression of sin and who honors a promise to establish them as a nation—a chosen people.[82] Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff stated that by appending the adjective "preferential" to the phrase "option for the poor," it is explicitly stated that this option cannot be "exclusively for the poor." They added,

> Christian love is love for the poor, but in the first place rather than exclusively. The church is on the side of the poor (through love of neighbor, *agape*), but not tied only to them (out of excluding, possessive love, *eros*). Its love for the poor is, then, a love of *predilection* and not an exclusive love.[83]

In the New Testament, we can read more about the poor, oppressed, sick, and marginalized and how God liberated them from the shackles of sins (personal, social, and structural)[84] through the person of Christ. Similarly, we construe Matthew 20:1–16 as a piece of revelation to us of the mystery of the predilection of God perfected in

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1982); Benedito Ferraro, *A Significacao Politica e Teologica Da Morte de Jesus a Luz Do Novo Testamento* (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1977), 92–95; in Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2013), 240.

[82] Segundo Galilea, "The Theology of Liberation, A General Survey," essay, in *Liberation Theology and the Vatican Document*, ed. Alberto Rossa (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1984), 37.

[83] Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible: The Church and the Poor*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Burns & Oates, 1989), 132. Emphasis added.

[84] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* par. 1869.

the mystery of the Incarnation. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, God became sensible in human fashion. The incarnation of the Word did not alter the nature of divinity but perfected its solidarity with humanity.[85] Through Jesus, we could taste and see the Lord's favor. It is also possible to see the phrase "preferential option for the poor" as a manifestation of Christ's messianic mission, which the prophet Isaiah foretold: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."[86]

On preferential option for the poor as God's predilection: "Because no one has hired us."

It may be asserted that the mystery of divine predilection encompasses both an act of glory and an act of mercy. Glory is derived from God's exercise of free will, whereas mercy is the praxis of justice. These two are expressed in the single act of the will, that is, love. I want to answer the question of whether God favors some people more than others. We dare to say yes, as Aquinas and the liberation theologians do in consensus.

If we reread the parable using the lens of the poor, we will see the *modus operandi* of the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (*basileia ton ouranōn*)[87] enacted by the landowner. The act of searching for more unemployed workers and the experience of being noticed and liberated from unemployment, as per the parable, can also be seen from the missiological perspective. The last workers said in the

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[85] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIIa, Q.1, Art. 1, ad. 1.

[86] Luke 4:18–19 (NRSVCE); and in Isaiah 61:1–11.

[87] Or "Kingdom of heaven." See Matthew 20-1 (SBL Greek New Testament).

parable, *"Because no one has hired us."* Like them, many others are deprived of fundamental rights and temporal goods.[88] It is in a situation like this that the landowner showed his predilection, not because he needed to hire the last workers but because he was compassionate. Compassion means "to suffer with." Many references in the canonical texts tell us about the compassion of God through Christ, which now invites us to imitate it. Jesus exhorts us to be merciful like the Father.[89] Comprehending the mystery of predilection will be very challenging without a minimum level of "suffering with" the widespread misery that impacts the vast majority of the human race.[90] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff said that we align ourselves with the poor *only* when we actively oppose the unjustly imposed poverty they face. For them, engaging in service with the oppressed also entails demonstrating love for the suffering Christ, a *"liturgy that is pleasing to God."*[91] Thanks to the love of God with a human heart in Christ. Dennis Murphy, a member of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, said, "The Heart of God and the human heart meet in the

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[88] Joenel Buencibello, "Ang Mabathalang Pag-Aaral Sa Awiting 'Dakilang Maylikha' Ayon Sa Bersyon Ng 'Ama Namin' Ng *Doctrina Cristiana*," *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators* 1, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v1i1.113, 134-135.

[89] Luke 6:36; Pope Francis, *"General Audience of 21 September 2016: 30. Merciful like the Father (cf. Lk 6:36-38),* The Holy See, 21 September 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160921_udienza-generale.html

[90] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 3–4.

[91] Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* trans. Paul Burns (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1987), 4.

Heart of Christ."[92] This meeting of the human heart and the Heart of God in the Heart of Christ gives context to the missiological mandate given by Christ at the institution of the holy Eucharist. In the gospel of John, we read,

> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.[93]

Jesus gave a criterion for loving—it is by loving as he does. A mission is bestowed upon us to meekly endeavor to embody the Heart of Christ in the world and be the Heart of God in making the kingdom of heaven known and loved in the here and now. It necessitates that we consistently demonstrate acts of benevolence and compassion whenever the circumstances warrant them. By proclaiming this to others, we ought to endeavor to amplify and multiply the love of Christ so that they, too, may enter into the Heart of God in the world.[94] But then again, to demonstrate *acts* of benevolence and compassion is dead without love. Actions must be animated by love. In St. Thomas, love is the first movement of the will and appetite.[95] Therefore, to embody the Heart of Christ in the world, one must align their will with God's so that through acts of love, others may witness God's love in action. In other words, the mystery of predilection is about God being God—*Love*. And the kingdom of heaven (βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) is about God's activity—*loving*. The kingdom of God has two

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[92] Dennis J. Murphy, *The Heart of the Word Made Flesh* (Bangalore, India: Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 2014), 15.

[93] John 13:34–35 (NRSV Catholic Edition).

[94] Raymundo T. Sabio, *Love Ripples from the Heart* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundations, 2021), 5.

[95] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, Q.20, Art. 1, co.

fundamental connotations in Jon Sobrino's mind. First, it asserts that "God rules in his acts," and second, it aims to transform an undesirable and oppressive historical-social reality into a more equitable one. Sobrino argued that the word "reign" of God is more suitable than the word "kingdom." Therefore, God's "reign" is the constructive action by which God brings about a transformation in the world, and God's "kingdom" is the realization of that transformation in this world: a history, a society, and a people molded in accordance with God's will.[96]

In the spiritual exercises by St. Ignatius de Loyola, he introduced to us the art of imaginative reading of the gospels. It is done by imagining the scenarios, the motivations, feelings and emotions of the actors and receivers of the acts vividly as possible as if you are present in the story. As a simple recommendation, try to look for the poor in the gospels and listen to them. Also, try to discover that wherever the poor are, there you will see Christ. This reminds us of his very words: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be."[97]

For Leonardo Boff, "to adopt the place of the poor is our first deed of solidarity with them. This act is accomplished by making an effort to view reality from their perspective. And when we view reality from their perspective, that reality simply must be transformed."[98] Along with this, be attentive to the *modus operandi* of God through Jesus for the poor. Contemplate God's gratuitous love. Allow the Spirit of God to show God's ways of loving—God's *predilection*—a preferential option

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[96] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 71.

[97] Matthew 6:21.

[98] Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Harper & Row, 1988), ix.

for the poor. Then, ask, "How can I be of service in the kingdom of heaven?" "How can I love like Christ?" "How can I be God's heart on earth?"

In light of Jesus' criterion for love, "to love as he does," the theology of divine predilection and the praxis of the preferential option for the poor converge not merely as doctrinal affirmations but as invitations to a transformative way of being, of Christian living. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, which call the believer to enter contemplatively into the Gospel scenes and to feel with the poor, reveal that authentic love is born of meditative empathy and sustained by deliberate, willful commitment.[99] Leonardo Boff's insistence on solidarity with the poor echoes this movement from contemplation to action, where love is not abstract sentiment but incarnated in concrete gestures of justice, mercy, and presence.[100] Pope Francis, in *Evangelii gaudium*, insists that

> Without the preferential option for the poor, "the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications".[101]

While Pope Leo XIV in *Dilexi te* affirms that;

> I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society, if we can only set ourselves free

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[99] Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), §§53–61.

[100] Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 130–35.

[101] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, par. 199; and in John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), 50; and in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, par. 93 (2001), 303.

> of our self-centeredness and open our ears to their cry.[102]

Thus, predilection is not favoritism but the divine initiative to dwell among the least, and the preferential option is not ideology but the spiritual discipline of choosing, again and again, to love as Christ loves—freely, purposefully, and in communion with the disadvantaged. In this synthesis, theology becomes lived compassion, and spirituality becomes the heartbeat of liberation.

Conclusion

The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) presents a profound theological challenge: reconciling divine generosity with human expectations of fairness. By placing St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of divine predilection in dialogue with Liberation Theology's preferential option for the poor, this study demonstrates that both traditions, despite their methodological differences, converge on the affirmation of God's sovereign love. Aquinas' metaphysical insight into God's unequal yet benevolent distribution of grace complements Liberation Theology's historical emphasis on divine solidarity with the oppressed. Together, they reveal a God who is both just and generous, transcending human merit and embracing all in love. This integrated approach not only deepens our understanding of Matthew's parable but also challenges contemporary theology to move beyond dichotomies and embrace a holistic vision of divine action—one that speaks meaningfully to both eternal truths and historical struggles.

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[102] Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, Apostolic Exhortation, October 4, 2025, Vatican.va, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html

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Nicholas of Cusa on Peace of Faith: A Foundational Framework for Synodality?

Wilfried Vanhoutte

Abstract: The year 2024 formed the background for the continuation of the Synod of bishops on Synodality. This article presents the initiative of pope Francis to create a Church model, situated around the concepts of communion, participation and mission, as intended to break down walls between categories of Church members, in particular between the clergy and faithful. However, while some people are perceiving this development as a threat to the purity and integrity of Catholic doctrine and practice, others expect more vitality instead. This article demonstrates how the current diversity of opinions recalls the antagonisms which Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) has witnessed, both in the Catholic Church, as well as in the relation between the Church and other religions. His call for 'one religion in a variety of rites' could inspire religious leaders today to aim at consensus and peace, rather than strife and rivalry. The principles of 'learned ignorance' and 'coincidence of opposites' upon which this call is based may also enlighten those who walk the synodal way today, in view of a more open and diverse Church. Harmony today should not be conceived as uniformity, but rather as mutual respect, and diversity-in-unity.

Keywords: Pope Francis • Synod • Synodality • Nicholas of Cusa • Learned Ignorance • Coincidence of Opposites • Diversity

Introduction

> Without foundations, synodality risks being a mere movement within the Church, rather than a unifying force of renewal that builds an authentic People of God in the contemporary world.[1]

[1] Elissa Roper, *Synodality and Authenticity: Towards a Contemporary Ecclesiology for the Catholic Church*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Divinity Australia (2020), 10, accessed 29 June 2025, https://www.academia.edu/97031416/DOCTORAL

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Pope Francis, during the opening ceremony of the preparatory period for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops on Synodality, mentioned three verbs to characterize the scope and meaning of *synodality*, a new term and a new concept to characterize a new form of governance in the Church: 'Meet, listen, discern'.[2]

The current article tends to be an exercise in each of these actions or attitudes. It aims to listen at perspectives on the concept of synodality as it is understood today, and set up a meeting with the late-medieval thinker Nicholas of Cusa, who emphasizes a worldview characterized by the coincidence of opposites, such as between intelligence and ignorance, ultimately culminating in the transcendent-immanent God. From this meeting, a discernment is expected to follow, that clarifies the meaning of synodality in the light of the philosophy of Cusanus, particularly his view on peace of faith, which refers to the peaceful coexistence of various rites as instantiations of the one and single religion, and on the underlying principles of learned ignorance and coincidence of opposites. A suggestion will be made, then, to identify the philosophy of Cusanus as a potential Christian philosophical foundation for the idea and practice of synodality.

Synodality: a new approach to dialogue in the Church

By means of three verbs – to meet, to listen and to discern - Francis points at what matters in the Church of today, how the concept of *synodality* is to be understood

_THESIS_Synodality_and_Authenticity_Towards_a_Contemporary_Ecclesiology_for_the_Catholic_Church.

[2] Jakov Rada, "Synodality of the Church" in *Bogoslovska smotra*, 91, no. 5 (2021), 909.

– and how it is not. In using the verb 'to meet', the pope connects synodality to an encounter of two or more persons, who are engaging in a dynamic of speaking and listening.

Understood in this way, the Church is presented as a community of Christian practice that is still open to new learning, illustrating the continuity of divine revelation and the plurality (*magisteria* rather than *magisterium*) of leadership.[3]

Listening and dialogue are herewith presented as essential attitudes in good church leadership, when it comes to both external and internal relations. They were applied – among others – during the plenary sessions as well as in sub-committee discussions of the International Theological Commission, which zoomed in on the concept of synodality, mainly during the period 2014-2018.[4] Tirimanna described synodality as 'a culture of consulting and active listening in all spheres of Church life'. A central role is reserved hereby for the *sensus fidei*, which is qualified as a 'supernatural instinct conferred in baptism, that guides the Church and prevents it from error'.[5]

In recent times, diversity in doctrinal belief, moral interpretation and liturgical style has become more and more prevalent, across different countries and continents, as well as among groups or categories of

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[3] Josef Mikulášek, "Synodality: the Church that still listens and learns", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 12, no. 1 (December 2022): 11-27. DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2022.15

[4] International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html

[5] Vimal Tirimanna, "Current Synodal Process: an Effort to Promote an Ecclesial Culture of Serious Listening to the *Sensus Fidei*", *Asian Horizons* 18, no. 2 (June 2024), 235. Accessed from https://www.dvkjournals.in, 15 June, 2025.

Church members. So, what can be said about the unity of that *sensus fidei*, which Tirimanna was referring to?

Some people are just mentioning that the trend toward diversity is not so new in the history of Christianity, as "pluralism in belief and conviction existed from the very outset", like about the Christian observation of Jewish law, or about the time of the return of Jesus.[6] Even as the ecumenical councils of the 4th and 5th centuries have tried to streamline the abundance of beliefs and opinions, diversity has continued, throughout the Middle Ages, and especially in the modern times.

The theme was also explicitly included in the Vatican-II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). At the end of the document, referring to the Church' mission to unify all human beings as one brotherhood under one Spirit, one can read the following: "Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. Hence, let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case."[7] While this fragment from *Gaudium et Spes* focuses on the 'unity-in-diversity' of the Church, and on the role which dialogue may play to maintain and reinforce it, other texts place

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[6] Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, & James D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Models and Strategies for Developing Christian Communities* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 5.

[7] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, on December 7, 1965, 92: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

the accent elsewhere, such as this one from *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican-II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Referring to the ordained pastors of the Church, the document states that "they understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind". *Lumen Gentium* goes deeper into the details of diversity in the Church, as it zooms in on the relation between ordained ministers and the laity, the role of which was heavily highlighted by the Second Vatican Council. Still emphasizing the idea of 'unity-in-diversity', the text clarifies diversity as a quality of the ministries and charisms in the Church. It is the task of Church leaders to maximize the use of that diversity, for the benefit of the Church, which is one. Involving the laity with their rich range of skills and qualities shouldn't be difficult if one considers that they have received a similar invitation as those in the priesthood or in the religious life: "These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world". Because of their deeper and wider involvement in the secular world, they are more exposed to its influence, but they are at the same time also better placed to reduce or transform that influence. Diversity may refer to one's racial, geographic or cultural background. Here too, diversity is no basis for exclusion or exclusiveness, but a trait that better underscores the Church's unity: "There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because "there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you

are all 'one' in Christ Jesus."[8] Diversity is also at the center of migration, which forms a hot issue in politics across the globe. Because of the difference between their homeland and their destination, migrants undertake a journey, usually not without challenges and difficulties. In his message to the 110th World day for Migrants and Refugees, held on September 29, 2024, Pope Francis associates synodality with the life of migrants, not so much because it features the "People of God journeying through history on pilgrimage, "migrating" we could say, to the Kingdom of Heaven", but because of God's presence among them across their journey, as with Israel during its Exodus to the land of Promise: "God precedes and accompanies his people and all his children in every time and place".[9] Synodality, therefore, means not only listening to one another, but also to God, as to a pastor or guide.

Dialogue: a call *ad intra* and *ad extra*

Indeed, the internal dialogue should not only be understood as a dialogue between sectors within the Catholic Church (this means the ordained, the professed, and the lay people); it may also be held with representatives of other religions, and, definitely, with fellow Christians who are part of other confessions or churches.

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[8] See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium,* Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, on November 21, 1964, 31;32. See also Gal 3,28; Col.3,11. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

[9] *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 110th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2024*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20240524-world-migrants-day-2024.html

Bro. Roger Schutz, the late founder and first prior of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé (France), in his work *Living today for God (Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu*), written while the Vatican-II council was still going on, called the division among Christians a 'drama'. He also mentioned that fervent prayer is one of the 'tools' that contemporary Christians avail of to overcome it, at least, if prayer isn't watered down to an escape from reality. The supernatural love of Christ and human friendship mediated by the Holy Spirit are mentioned as features that promote a longing for recognition and unity.[10] Bro. Roger goes on saying that – in the present time – modern Christianity will either realize a sense of the universal, or its constituent churches in the current fragmented Christian landscape will turn to themselves, preventing grace or salvation from shining over all.[11]

Such would be a blatant sidelining of the opinion of one of Christianity's 'founders'. How could the following exhortation not cause a commotion among the participants in today's discussion?

"I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you." (1 Cor. 1,10-12. http://bible.usccb.org/bible/1Corinthians/1)

Even as Paul is calling for unity, there is no doubt that he recognizes how unity cannot be achieved without retaining some degree of variety in a bustling port city as Corinth during his time. Using the Pauline theme of the Body of Christ to refer to the Church, Vatican II emphasizes that all the faithful form one single body, just

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[10] Roger Schutz, *Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu* (Taizé: Les Presses de Taizé, 1964), 11-12.

[11] Id., p.17.

as the various body parts belong to one and the same body, and suffering in one of these parts means suffering in the entire body.[12] However, the diversity of charisms and functions is also highlighted (Ibid.): "As all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so also are the faithful in Christ. Also, in the building up of Christ's Body various members and functions have their part to play."

In spite of the widespread recognition of dialogue in view of diversity-in-unity, not all parties in the Church are happy with the concept of synodality and the direction which it takes. Some people are fearing that the pope's concern for unity-in-diversity may overshoot its target and actually cause division in the Church.

Diversity in interpretation and appreciation of synodality

A number of synod participants have voiced criticism of pope Francis' initiative. Actually, pope Francis and the synod's co-organizers are very much aware of the adverse reactions among a part of the clergy, and the synthesis report of the first session (2023) also explicitly mentions the need to understand the reasons for this resistance.[13] Among the most vocal critics is German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former Prefect of the Congregation

[12] See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

[13] A proposal under point 1n in Part I states: "There is a need to find ways to involve the clergy (deacons, priests, bishops) more actively in the synodal process during the course of the next year. A synodal Church cannot do without their voices, experiences, and contributions. We need to understand better the reasons why some have felt resistant to the synodal process." *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session: A Synodal Church in Mission*, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf, accessed 8 July, 2025.

(now called 'Dicastery') for the Doctrine of the Faith from 2012 - when he was appointed by the late pope Benedict XVI – until 2017. Having left the 2023 session four days before its end, he declared afterwards that (1)everything in the synod appeared to be 'pre-organized', a 'manipulation' 'following a stage-managed plan toward predetermined outcomes'; that it was (2)not directed by bishops (meaning that the synod on synodality is more an 'Anglican-style' synod or a worldly parliament), and (3)'very controlled' and dominated by a few people who 'talked to them, [bishops], as if they did not know any theology', somewhat as if those people were 'professors who are speaking to the students of the first semester'. Cardinal Müller wished that the synod would be returned to the bishops as main leaders and organizers, allowing them to 'reclaim their role as advisers and as witnesses of the revealed truth'. He objected to the fact that bishops are spread over the various small discussion groups of mixed composition, that constitute the preferred working formula of the synod, rather than that of plenary sessions. His comments may have triggered a reaction from the pope on the first day of the 2024 session, when Francis defended the conferring of voting rights to the women and lay persons taking part in the synod (96 out of a total of 368 participants). The pope stated that the participation of lay people doesn't undermine the authority of the bishops (an authority which they are supposed to carry out together with the people entrusted to their care), nor does it compromise the episcopal dimension of the conference, as it is not a matter of just replacing one group with another, but together to embody the Church that lives from the relations among its members. These words of Francis were also meant to refute suggestions that the decisions made by the synod might be questionable from a canonical point of view, given the rights of non-bishops.

Freedom of expression and participative forms of government may help creating an atmosphere of ongoing open discussion in the Church, by which authority and established beliefs or practices are challenged, even if these are based upon tradition and expertise. Tensions are further increased by geographical differences, as the proposed paradigm shift to a modern society is mainly called for in the so-called 'West', or North-America and Europe, while Christians in other parts of the world find this much less of a priority. Pope Francis had, therefore, good reasons to invoke the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, to maintain unity in the Church as the synodality project continues. Most of all, however, the direction that pope Leo XIV will take is going to be decisive for the future of the synodality project.

Nicholas of Cusa and the Church in the fifteenth century

Nicholas was born in the small German town of Kues (in Latin: *Cusa*) at the Moselle river, a tributary of the Rhine. He studied philosophy for one year in Heidelberg, before moving to Padua (Italy) where he took up canon law. In Padua, he met famous fellow students like the future cardinals Cesarini and Capranica, and the physician Toscanelli. This exposure to an international environment marked him and his thought significantly. He was also introduced to new ideas, including consensus theory, that recommended a common agreement as basis for belief and system of governance, which he applied to the Church. Conciliarism had already been a thriving intellectual current before Cusanus' time. The theory brought him initially to choose the side of the council over that of the pope in the power conflict between them. After having joined the council of Basel (Switzerland), Nicholas shifted his position and joined the papal party when they

left Basel for Ferrara, the place indicated by the pope to continue the meeting. This move of Nicholas may have been inspired by opportunism, perhaps. It definitely has triggered a number of comments among scientists. Some are pointing at the developments in Constantinople, that was at risk of being overrun by the troops of the Turkish-Ottoman empire. Others, like Izbcki, are suggesting it may have had something to do with Nicholas' personal affiliations, particularly with Cardinal Cesarini, whose influence was eclipsed as leader of the conciliarist faction at the council of Basel. Once Nicholas had embraced the papalist position, he didn't bluntly reject conciliarism, but stated that papal consent was needed for the council's rulings to become effective, unless the pope's actions endangered the Church, which God would prevent.[14] At any rate, when the Byzantine leadership started to look for support in the West, there was initially some confusion, as to who represented the Western Church, the council or the pope? They eventually chose the pope's party to talk to. As a result, Nicholas was included in a team of Western legates joining the Byzantine messengers as they returned to their home city. After meeting the patriarch and the emperor in Constantinople, these decided in turn to join them back to Venice. This took place in the winter 1437-1438. It was during this journey, contemplating the starry night skies from the sea, that Nicholas had his fundamental inspiring experience, that would lead to his theory of 'learned ignorance'.

The sudden shift of Nicholas in favor of the papal party also illustrated how different views on church policy can coexist even in one person, even as this person was and remained a fervent defender and dedicated

[14] See Thomas Izbicki, "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance", *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 3 (1993), 189-190, https://hdl.handle.net/1813/56610.

member of the mystical Body of Christ. Indeed, there is no indication that the shift in alliance resulted from some form of weakness in the ecclesiastic fervor of Nicholas. Corseri points at the triadic structure of *De docta ignorantia*, the first book of which focuses on God, the second on His Creation - the World -, and the third on Christ; it is here where considerations on the Church are to be found, which we will present again in paragraph 7.[15] Izbicki underscores the importance of Christ as well to understand the nature of the Church. As unity between the finite mind and the infinite Truth, Christ has a divine and a human nature. Since His identity consists of both the absolute maximum and the contracted maximum, so the Church is based upon faith and understanding, in as far as the former informs the latter. Through faith, the humanity of Christ can become present in all, as all are called to participate in Christ, their model or exemplar. The degree to which they participate in Christ may depend on the individual nature of each. Since not all baptized are good persons, it is impossible to say with certainty who are united to Christ, or who are members of the 'true' Church, which is to be distinguished from the 'visible', 'discernible' or 'sensible' Church. Sensible signs can only lead to conjectural knowledge. While Christ is the exemplar of the true or triumphant Church, Peter is the exemplar of the visible Church. Conformity to Peter requires responsible action from the pope, as he is called to build the Church, while lesser prelates are held to be obedient to the pope, as they are participating only to a lower extent in Peter's authority. Nicholas defended the position of pope Eugenius IV against the council of Basel, since the council had committed an act of disobedience

[15] Vincenzo Maria Corseri, *Caput-Corpus: Il linguaggio della concordantia nella riflessione politico-religiosa di Nicola Cusano* (doctoral dissertation, University of Palermo, 2014), 63. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14242/174169.

and rebellion against the pope by declaring its own supremacy as a dogma. Nicholas found this unacceptable. His shift in position had, therefore, also a theoretical or ecclesiological basis.[16]

Nicholas of Cusa and the coincidence of opposites in religion

Conciliarist or papalist, Cusanus believed that it is hard to catch God through Reason, as the human capacity of understanding is too limited. This may be explained by understanding some of the main sources of Cusanus, which include Neoplatonism (especially Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), as well as Medieval authors like Ramón Lull and Meister Eckhart. Rizzo also explicitly associates Cusanus with Italian Renaissance philologists as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, placing Cusanus with determination in the humanistic tradition, said to be characterized by a strong inclination to conciliate different philosophical and

[16] Izbicki underscores the speculative character of these ecclesiological thoughts, that are not only expressed in Cusanus' masterpiece *De docta ignorantia*, but also in his correspondence, such as his letter to Spanish canonist Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo, and contain far less references to Church structure than his early works. Making use of Nicholas' speculative concepts of enfolding/unfolding or *complicatio/explicatio* to the Church, Izbicki writes: "The Church, Cusanus said, was "unfolded" in Peter, the first to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. On that profession, and on the one who professed it, the Church was founded. What was enfolded in Peter was unfolded in the Church, producing "one Church participating in the same confession in a varied diversity of believers". The Church needed to be both diverse and one, sharing "one entire confession in all and each part of it". T. Izbicki, "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance," in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1993), 199, https://hdl.handle.net/1813/56610.

religious traditions.[17] While some scholars would be eager also to emphasize Cusanus' medieval roots, he distances himself from Aristotelian logic, which is so common to any rational project of science. Since God is mystery, and His relation to the human mind one of disproportion and incommensurability, no 'science' of God can ever be possible. Logical laws like that of non-contradiction and the excluded middle cannot be applied to God, who is incomprehensible and unspeakable. On the theoretical level, it is easier to say what God is not than to tell what He is, paving the way for negative theology.

In his treatise *On the Vision of God*, written in the same year as *On Peace of Faith*, Nicholas tried to offer to a community of Benedictine monks a guide in mystical theology. Together with the treatise, he delivered a painted icon of a face, the vision of which appeared to be moving with the spectator as this one kept looking at the icon from different sides or angles. The idea that Cusanus wanted to share is that, while God can only be seen from one perspective at a time, He doesn't coincide with any of them, but should be understood from all of them together, as this is what constitutes the only way to a complete picture of Him. Meditating from the point of view of a spectator, Nicholas wrote, as he was addressing God: 'You stand firm and are proceeding, but, at the same time, you are not standing firm and not proceeding. This painted face reveals it to me'. The best explanation of this paradox is that God, as essence of all essences, stands above all predicated qualities or their opposites. This is why Nicholas uses the typically mystical expression 'to enter darkness' as a condition to come to know God as He is, this is as surrounded by a wall of 'coincidence of

[17] Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, De Pace Fidei", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 72. DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

opposites', which is above all rational capabilities. This is also called the Wall of Paradise[18], which Human Reason is unable to penetrate. God, however, is on the other side of that Wall. As long as Reason keeps thinking in opposites, such as maximum versus minimum, straight versus curved, actual being versus potential being, or 'other' versus 'non-other', then, God cannot be seen or known. Therefore, the human mind should do away with Reason in transcendent matters, and explore the paths of mystical theology instead, as exemplified by – among others - the Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Nicholas emphasized in his contacts with the monks of the abbey of Tegernsee that this would imply forsaking all kinds of theological 'expertise', and confessing a state of 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) instead.[19]

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[18] The Latin text sounds as follows: "Stas igitur et progrederis et neque stas, neque progrederis simul. Facies haec depicta mihi ostendit id ipsum. (…) Unde experior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem et admittere coincidentiam oppositorum super omnem capacitatem rationis et quaerere ibi veritatem ubi occurrit impossibilitas, (…) Et repperi locum in quo revelate reperieris, cinctum contradictorium coincidentia. Et ista est murus paradisi, in quo habitas; (…)" Nikolaus von Kues, 'De visione Dei', IX, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III, Vienna: Herder, 1989, pp.130-132.

[19] In the introduction to his translation and comment, Jasper Hopkins reviews possible translations of the title *De docta ignorantia* and their implications. We prefer to cite it in Latin. See Nicholas of Cusa*, On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 2-3.

Cusanus and Peace of Faith

Rizzo makes the meaningful observation that Nicholas could have preached a crusade upon learning about the massacre of Constantinople, but he didn't do so, unlike some of his influential friends like cardinal Bessarion and Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the later pope Pius II.[20]

The position of Cusanus in favor of a diplomatic or negotiated solution for conflicts in religion, is explained in his work *De pace fidei* ('On peace of faith'). It was written in 1453, as a reaction to the shocking fall of Constantinople, and built upon metaphysical and epistemological premises from earlier stages in the life of Cusanus, such as learned ignorance and the coincidence of opposites.

The text of *De pace fidei* is conceived as a fictitious event in which 'wise men', representatives of various religions, are called before the Lord, and are holding a meeting (actually a synod!), in which they discuss how to maintain or achieve peace among them. This meeting takes place in Heaven, and leads to the conclusion that the goal to achieve is that of a single religion, expressed in a variety of rites or traditions (*una religio in rituum varietate*).[21]

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[20] Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei*", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 73, DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

[21] The Latin text states: "Est igitur sapientia Deus unus, simplex, aeternus, principium omnium"; "Una est igitur religio et cultus omnium intellectu vigentium, quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur." Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, V, VI, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III (Vienna: Herder, 1989),723-725.

. In this case, no more killings or forced changes of confession will take place in the world. The whole of this heavenly meeting is surrounded by a double framework, the most exterior being the historical facts that led to the 1453 fall of Constantinople, as the city was taken by force by the troops of the Turkish Ottoman empire with lots of bloodshed. It was on this shocking event that a man is said to have been meditating, up to the point of being brought to an elevated intellectual height, and having had a vision, involving the king of Heaven and Earth.[22] In this vision, the Almighty one was informed through messengers about the violence in the human world because of different religious beliefs and rites. Upon hearing this, the King of kings ordered his messengers to select for each region or religion a wise representative; all of these were called to join a meeting under the presidency of the Word of God. Two details in this story are important for future actualizations: (1) the meeting in view of 'unification' is based upon the consensus of participants, and (2) it will take place upon 'angelic' assistance, protection and guidance. In other words, discussions should be based upon respectful listening to each other, and under prayerful openness to advice coming from God's Spirit.[23] This meeting with wise and authoritative representatives of the various religious

[22] Nicholas of Cusa may be referring to himself here, as the subject of a deep reflection on the fate of a place he had personally visited on his mission of 1437.

[23] The Latin terms used are "(…) omnem religionum diversitatem communi omnium hominum consensu in unicam concorditer reduci amplius inviolabilem". Regarding the angels: "assistentes ex sua curia administratorios angelicos spiritus, qui vos custodiant ac dirigant (…)". Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, III, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III (Vienna: Herder, 1989), 717.

denominations constitutes the second frame, within which the conference proper takes place, that aimed at finding 'peace of faith'.

It is of utmost importance to take note that the meeting intended to find common ground among world religions was presided by the *Verbum incarnatum*, the 'Incarnated Word' (also called *Verbum Divinum*). This exclusively Christian element of religious belief is presupposed to be common and acceptable to all religions, according to Nicholas. The Incarnated Word may be a Christian article of faith, but it simultaneously transcends this particular Christian framework, to achieve the status of universal belief, for which there is a universal foundation.

Even as this could suggest a 'pro-Christian bias' on the side of Cusanus, it doesn't mean that he would just want to reduce all religions to one. Pointing at what he sees as common among them, Nicholas wants to identify some common ground, that can function as basis for sharing beliefs and practices, perhaps also for mutual recognition. The degree of unity that underlies the manifest diversity among major religions in no way erases this diversity, of course. Therefore, this kind of unity is still very different from 'plain' Christian faith and doctrine. However, to alleviate tension among religions, one has to start somewhere. Diversity-in-unity is an interesting perspective, as it may allow religions to bring out the best of what they have to offer. In the dialogue, each representative is encouraged to show the best of what his tradition has to offer. In this sense, plurality may lead to enhanced knowledge and devotion, as the character of Saint Paul states in *De pace fidei*.[24]

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[24] "Ubi non potest conformitas in modo reperiri, permittantur nationes, salva fide et pace in suis devotionibus et ceremonialibus. Augebitur etiam fortassis devotio ex quadam diversitate, quando quaelibet natio conabitur ritum suum studio et diligentia

The location indicated for the meeting in view of the acceptance of the new and only faith is Jerusalem, which is said to be most fit for this purpose. This is, no doubt, because of the fundamental role played by this holy city in the history and theology of the three religions of the Book, or Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the midst of simmering tensions, Jerusalem is the place which can bring them together. Therefore, Jerusalem is the chosen place where peace will be founded upon the single faith that all will adopt, as it was the object of peace wishes by the psalmist.[25]

The One and the Many, *complicatio* and *explicatio*: the two faces of Being

The relation between the one and the many is a theme that recurs throughout the work of Nicholas of Cusa, and which can be traced to his Neoplatonic sources, such as Pseudo-Dionysius or Proclus. But why would Nicholas have applied it to the relation among religions, except from the tumultuous events of 1453? He must have been aware, indeed, of other contentions during or shortly

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splendidiorem efficere (…)" Nikolaus of Kues, 'De pace fidei', XIX, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III, Vienna: Herder, 1989, 797. A good English translation of the work came from Jasper Hopkins: *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: The Arthur Banning Press, 1994).

[25] Jerusalem is called in De pace fidei, III, "aptissimum" or 'most appropriated' for the task of 'reducing' religions to a single one. Regarding the psalmist, the text sounds as follows: "For the peace of Jerusalem pray: "May those who love you prosper! May peace be within your ramparts, prosperity within your towers." For the sake of my brothers and friends I say, "Peace be with you." For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I pray for your good." Psalm 122, 6-9, https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/122.

before his time. The issue of the Hussite question, or the simultaneous presence of three popes are just some of the conflicts affecting religions in his time or shortly before it. Conflicts are the opposite of unity; they refer to multiplicity in a confused way. Against this background, Nicholas rejects relativism, but addresses tensions by reflecting on the truth of his own faith and clarifying some of its aspects. This is in view of demonstrating how other religious opinions or confessions can be reduced to his own, in case there are shared points of belief. While there may be a missionary dimension in his attitude to other religions, his approach is essentially truth-based, as Riedenauer clarifies. The attempt to reconcile different beliefs requires the establishment of an integrated philosophy of religion, in which a hierarchy of truths is to be established. The primary dogmatic core and the secondary beliefs and practices that were deduced from it are to be distinguished as *complicatio* and *explicatio*, whether the one or the many are being focused. The single universal religion enfolds the many concrete religions in itself, while those are like the un-folding of it, just like God enfolds the world, which is His creative unfolding. Riedenauer still adds two important considerations to this. The first is related to the humanistic atmosphere of the early Renaissance, which became increasingly aware of the historic dimension of human culture and of the possibility to model it creatively. In shaping his own culture, the human being somehow plays its role as God's image, because of its creative activity that reflects God's very own original creativity. Rizzo, who also underscores the role of the dialectic of the one and the many, connects this to Nicholas' understanding of the human mind (*mens*) as 'measure'

(*mensura*), and knowledge as conjectural.[26] In the second place, Cusanus' emphasis on God's infinite and incomprehensible nature makes all historic religions look partial, unfinished and ultimately inadequate. This is because religion – whether individual or institutional – is the work of a finite being, that tries to shape its understanding of the Absolute by means of dogmas, norms, symbols and rituals. The incommensurability between the Infinite and the finite turns the hermeneutic project into a conjectural direction, this is that of learned ignorance. In the light of this position, it becomes difficult for any concrete religion to claim absolute validity and dominance over others. This superior position may be reserved for some kind of abstract or 'original' religion, that has received different faces as it was providentially expressed through a range of geographically and historically determined confessions and practices, cults or creeds.[27] However, the tension between the one and the many or between the general and the particular can also be spotted within the boundaries of one single and concrete religion, such as Christianity or the Catholic Church. The various Christian confessions constitute the various faces of Christianity, while the different schools, movements, orders and congregations in the Roman Catholic Church are different and valuable ways of living the Catholic identity. Religious tolerance is needed as much within a particular religion, as it is between different religions, given the richness of the various spiritualities, viewpoints and practices. Dialogue is

[26] Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei*", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 75, DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

[27] Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog*, 21 (2009), 25-27. https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf

needed as an ongoing mutual recognition and openness, in view of a better self-understanding, at the individual and group-level, and at the institutional level as well.

In Book III, chapter 12, of *De docta ignorantia*, Nicholas takes on the unity of the Church, as a part of his reflections on Christ, the *maximum absolutum et contractum*.[28] Even as nobody in this life can ever achieve the maximum faith and maximum love, which are exclusive attributes of Christ, it is through faith and love that human beings can be associated to Him, that they can participate in Him. This happens within the Church, for which Nicholas uses metaphors from Sacred Scripture, such as that of the body and its members or of the vine and its branches.[29] No member can have faith or love, or relate to other members, except through the body. However, Nicholas emphasizes throughout his text that there are various degrees in people's relation with Christ, which implies that 'in one Jesus, there is diversity in harmony'. We can increase our degree of faith and love, but we need ultimately the grace of Christ himself. Without Him, we cannot achieve anything. When His glory will appear, the blessed ones will be united to Christ and also to God, in the true Church, the Church of the triumphant. This is the Church of which Cusanus says that 'it cannot be in some other way more one', or that 'the more one the Church is, the greater it is', that it is 'maximal, since no greater union of the Church is possible'. But, if the union of the Church is maximal, it coincides on high with the hypostatic union of the natures

[28] Nicholas refers to the union of the divine and the human nature in Christ, for which he uses his usual terminology of opposites, in this case the Absolute and the Contracted. See Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 145-150.

[29] 1 Cor. 12, 12-31; John 15, 1-11.

in Christ. And since the union of the natures of Jesus is maximal, it coincides with the Absolute Union, which is God'.[30] A much stronger wording of the unity of the Church is hardly possible.

Unity, plurality and truth

The 15th Century is said to have witnessed an accelerated transformation and fragmentation of culture, religion and society. Cohesion was often far to be found, which turned projects of unification into very daring initiatives. While unity is a target to achieve, it is under no condition to be understood as 'uniformity', based upon the words of Saint Paul in the dialogue. What matters first of all is that plurality doesn't lead to disbelief and quarrel, in which case it would become destructive. Unity should, therefore, be balanced with its manifold appearances, so, a strict uniformity won't be necessary, as it even could hamper genuine devotion. Unity needs plurality, and vice-versa. The ultimate secret of this lies in God's own paradoxical nature. God is hidden, but lets Himself being found by whom He wants to be found, by whom he has revealed Himself to. As there are multiple acts of revelation, so there is a multiplicity of representations that correspond to them. [31] The reason for diversity is, hence, not opposed to unity that is in God, but it is His very own will to be known in different ways. Any form of ignorance of God is ultimately the result of the partial and incomplete nature of God's revelation. For

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[30] Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 149.

[31] "Tu ergo, qui es dator vitae et esse, es ille, qui in diversis ritibus differenter quaeri videris et in diversis nominibus nominaris, quoniam ut es manes omnibus incognitus et ineffabilis". See Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, I, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften,* (…), 1989, 711.

this reason, Nicholas – through the character of the angel or messenger at the opening of the conference - begs and prays to God that He will show His face, Himself as He truly is. Errors were produced as a combination of permanent change in the world, and the free will of Man, as was stated by the character of the Incarnated Word. However, since truth is one, the diversity of Religions shall be reduced to one single, straight faith. Faith and truth are, therefore, correlated, just as tolerance and truth. Riedenauer underscores how the verb *tolerare* occurs only once in *De pace fidei*, suggesting that tolerance shouldn't be understood in the modern way, this is as a pragmatic concept and attitude, but that it has more to do with the concept of truth, which explains why Nicholas prioritizes the establishment of the common, Christian truth in all religions, before proceeding to the acceptance of their internal differences, expressed in their rites and customs.[32] Therefore, dialogue in religion is about truth, as all religions are developments around a central truth-claim.[33] Truth is what brings religions together, while habits, practices, creeds and guidelines are what distinguishes them. There can be no suspicion of relativism in maintaining that religions have their own ways and motives as they are participating in a single common truth.

It still should be admitted that the dialogue presented by Cusanus is based on a goal and a direction that were given by the King of Kings Himself, and that all representatives were basically very cooperative in bringing the dialogue to a productive end. (After all, it was a 'heavenly' meeting!) In contemporary settings,

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[32] Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog*, 21 (2009), 21-22, https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf.

even during a synod, this may be less obvious, as modern emphasis on the democratic right to dissent may sometimes trigger excessive assertions, that block the discussions or prevent them from harmoniously proceeding to an agreement.[34] As Riedenauer observes, Cusanus' heavenly meeting has a premodern touch, as it is based upon the premises that religion is primarily about truth, that truth can be basically known, and that a consensus among religions is achievable. In the modern and postmodern era, diversity and plurality are often perceived as complex and problematic, and, therefore, approached from a more pessimistic perspective.[35]

Conclusion

It has become some kind of a tradition for a pope to visit countries and churches across the world. From 26 to 29 September, 2024, pope Francis paid a visit to Belgium and Luxemburg. In the centre of a very varied programme stood a listening Church leader, facing victims of abuse, enthusiastic crowds, verbal academics, critical journalists, etc. The dynamics of dialogue and discussion during a papal visit recall those of synodality.

Sixty years after Vatican II, the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops on Synodality meant to address specific contemporary issues in which the Church is involved. However, some are questioning

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[34] One may find an account of Nicholas' way of addressing inter-religious relations in: 'Nicholas of Cusa and Religious Peace', *The Regensburg Forum: History, Philosophy and Theology in the Augustinian Tradition*, https://regensburgforum.com/2020/03/20/nicholas-cusanus-and-religious-peace/

[35] Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog* 21 (2009): 23, https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf.

the theological and pastoral justification of the synodal path. What may be its foundation?

The call for a synod in 'synodality style' spontaneously evokes the fictitious initiative of the King of Kings, that was described in the 15th Century-work *De pace fidei* by Nicholas of Cusa, primarily written as a reaction to the upsetting fall of Constantinople. While the core of the work consists in an imaginary and idealized meeting in Heaven, it meant to be a response to a profound crisis, that had shaken the late medieval world. The outcome of the meeting was that the only way to prevent conflicts among religions is to promote the idea of a single religion in a variety of rites. This idea would make it clear that diversity among religions is not dangerous, but that it actually constitutes an enrichment, provided that the common focus and joint interest in what is basic is understood and underscored.

The underlying values of the dialogue among religions are echoing those of the contemporary synod on synodality. While perspectives on truth in the Church may be many, they pose no danger, as long as there is mutual respect, and a sincere effort to reach a consensus, after prayerful listening to divine counsel.

Therefore, it may be argued that the dialogue *De pace fidei*, as well as the deeper philosophical principles of Nicholas of Cusa, that had emerged from negative and mystical theology, and are demonstrated in his major works such as *De docta ignorantia* and *De coniecturis*, may work as a universal blueprint for fundamental exchanges and public debates in the Church, as they widen the view and deepen opportunities for peace.

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Discoursing Divorce: Three Ethical Readings on the Subject of Divorce

Joshua Jose R. Ocon

Abstract: This paper explores the ethical dimensions of divorce in the Philippines, where its prohibition is deeply rooted in Catholic doctrine and enshrined in legal frameworks. Drawing from three ethical theories—natural law, Kantian ethics, and Habermasian discourse ethics—the paper investigates divorce as not merely a legal issue but an ethical one. Natural law theory, with its emphasis on moral obligations derived from human nature, often opposes divorce due to its potential harm to the family unit. However, exceptions are considered in cases of abuse or harm. Kantian ethics views marriage as a contractual relationship, allowing for divorce when personal dignity and autonomy are compromised. Habermasian discourse ethics, grounded in rational deliberation and consensus-building, offers a framework for inclusive discussions on divorce, promoting fairness and representation for marginalized voices. The paper argues that the interplay of these ethical frameworks highlights the complexity of divorce in the Philippine context, advocating for more inclusive and critical dialogue to address its legal and moral implications.

Keywords: Divorce • Marriage • Divorce in the Philippines • Thomistic Natural Law • Marriage and Duty • Discourse Ethics

Introduction: A Brief Introduction to Divorce

Notwithstanding the revival of discussions on its tenability, the discourse on divorce in the Philippine setting has always been contentious, considering the complex interplay of perspectives from the culture, the law, and religion, primarily Catholicism. In a predominantly Catholic country that sees the bond of marriage as sacred and God-sanctioned, discussions on divorce remain taboo, more or less. Many are content with remaining silent about the matter and in favor of accepting that it is starkly illegal and even immoral on

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account of the sacrosanct binding that it presumably destroys.

Divorce, as defined broadly, signifies the legal dissolution of a marital relation which frees and permits individuals to marry again.[1] A clearer distinction also exists between its two kinds—*divortio a vinculo matrimonio* and *divortio a mensa et thoro*.[2] The latter pertains to a marriage that persists under relative divorce, while the former is the absolute kind that dissolves the bond of matrimony, the kind that most are familiar with when dealing with divorce as a concept.[3]

Defined as such, it was recognized before the Civil Code enactment in the Philippines in 1949.[4] At present, however, divorce is not recognized in the Philippines and, as such, remains prohibited under Philippine law, making it the last country in the world, alongside the Vatican City, without legal provisions for divorce.[5] The 1987 Philippine Constitution explicitly upholds marriage as "an inviolable social institution" upon which the family is founded, creating an injunction for the State to protect it.[6] For many, it goes beyond the mere legal recognition of a relationship; its binding is out of pure commitment

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[1] Jorge M. Juco. "Fault, consent and breakdown—the sociology of divorce legislation in the Philippines," *Philippine Sociological Review* 14, no. 2 (1966), 67.

[2] See Jihan A. Jacob, "Reintroduction of divorce into Philippine law" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2013), 3.

[3] See Jacob, "Reintroduction of divorce, 3.

[4] *Civil Code of the Philippines*, Republic Act No. 386, 1949. See Jacob, "Reintroduction of divorce," 2.

[5] See Jeofrey B. Abalos, "Divorce and separation in the Philippines: Trends and correlates," *Demographic Research* 36, no. 50 (2017), 1515.

[6] *The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines,* Article XXV, Section 2.

and love between two couples until the end of their lives.[7] Regardless, the Philippine law is clear on how it sees marriage as a fundamental social institution, so much so that in order to prevent its dissolution, the Family Code of the Philippines postulates possible remedies in the form of nullity, annulment, and legal separation.[8]

The problem is that on the one hand, despite these legal attempts to supplant the perceived need for divorce, many still deem it necessary to pursue its legalization for various reasons that elicit ethical responses: domestic abuse and violence, child/ren welfare, and even mental health, among others.[9] On the other hand, those who stand for marriage and against divorce see the matter not merely as a legal dispute but an ethical one. The prohibition on divorce in the Philippines is rooted primarily in Catholic doctrine, which holds marriage as indissoluble once contracted.[10] This religious influence

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[7] Dorothy Grace Agliam, et al., "A Comprehensive Literature Review of Marital Dissolution in the Philippines: Legal, Socio-Cultural, and Feasibility Perspectives," *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review* 7, no. 5 (2024): [2596-2603], 2598.

[8] *Family Code of the Philippines,* Executive Order No. 209, 1987. See Jacob, "Reintroduction of divorce," 3. The Family Code defines 'marriage' as a "special contract of permanent union between a man and a woman entered into in accordance with law for the establishment of conjugal and family life." See Abalos, "Divorce and separation," 1525.

[9] See Abalos, "Divorce and separation." See also Rowalt Albudbud et al., "Reframing divorce as a mental health policy issue in the Philippines," *The Lancet: Psychiatry* 11, no. 4 (2024): 241-2.

[10] Divorce is 'anti-family' and 'anti-life,' a 'taboo' and a 'moral depravity.' See Agliam, "Marital Dissolution in the Philippines," 2598. More, "divorce is unconstitutional, that it is anathema to Filipino culture, that it is immoral, that it will destroy the Filipino family, that it will legalize promiscuity, that it will contribute to the increase in broken families, that it will be abused by spouses who find it easier to give up on their marriage rather than try to reconcile their differences,

permeates societal norms and legislative frameworks, contributing significantly to the staunch opposition against legalizing divorce. Despite efforts from various sectors advocating for divorce as a remedy for failed marriages and a means to empower individuals, legislative attempts have repeatedly failed in the face of religious and conservative opposition.

This paper aims to read divorce in the Philippine setting from the standpoint of three normative ethics—natural law theory, Kantian ethics, and Habermasian discourse ethics. This reading of divorce as an ethical issue through the aforementioned presents each theory's merits that figure importantly in making sense of the divorce, not only as a legal matter but more so as an ethical one.

Natural Law and Divorce

Let us begin with the Catholic purview that relies on the natural law, particularly as formulated by Thomas Aquinas, whose understanding of it is considered paradigmatic.[11] Thomas locates the natural law subsumed under the law itself. That the law pertains to reason as its principle insofar as it commands persons "to act or be restrained from acting," and that this reason directs law both to the good of all (*bonum commune*) and the good of an individual (*bonum privatum unius*), imply its obligatory nature.[12] In the human person, the good is identified with "that to which befits [one's] nature, that to which [one] has a natural inclination as a rational

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that it will lead to custody battles, and that it will be detrimental for the children" (See Abalos, "Divorce and separation," 1525).

[11] See John Finnis, *Natural Law & Natural Rights,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

[12] *Summa Theologica,* I-II, q.90, a.1-2. Hereafter ST.

being."[13] In this account, reason is entangled with the good in how the human person is directed toward attaining this good.

However, this law does not stand apart from God's divine order for Thomas. He situates the natural law within a hierarchy of laws where the eternal law serves as its foundation as it governs all of creation. The natural law is thus "the rational creature's participation in the eternal law."[14] By virtue of reason, humans discern their participation in the divine order through the inclinations that direct them toward their proper ends. The moral authority of the naturalists law therefore comes, not from human consensus but from human participation in the eternal law.[15]

This directedness obligated by reason makes it a law, and its implicitness in human nature makes it 'natural.' For Thomas, therefore, the natural law postulates that since it is the same in all humans, it prioritizes the attainment of those things that are necessary to them.[16] Four principles with intrinsic value govern the good-

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[13] Frederick Copleston SJ, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy, Volume II* (New York: Image Books, 1993), 406-7.

[14] ST I-II, a. 91, a. 2.

[15] See Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy,* 214-217.

[16] "Wherefore the order of the precepts of the natural law is according to the order of natural inclinations. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all the substances, inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature…and; secondly, there is in man an inclination to things that pertain to him more specially, according to that nature which he has in common with other animals…and; thirdly, there is in man an inclination to good, according to the nature of his reason, which nature is proper to him: thus man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God and to live in society." See *Summa Theologica* I-II, q.94, a.2, resp.

directedness of human actions toward their attainment - life, procreation, knowledge and sociability.[17] Firstly, the principle of life is assured by the natural inclination to preserve one's being (*vita hominis conservator, et contrarium impeditur*).[18] Secondly, procreation is emphasized by inclinations that nature has instilled in us as animals such as intercourse and the education of offspring that results from it (*coniunctio maris et feminae*, *et educatio liberorum, et similia*).[19] Thirdly, surpassing our commonality with other animals, our capacity for knowledge, alongside the capacity to live with fellow humans, is explained by the inclination to know the truth, especially as it pertains to God, and to live socially (*ad hoc quod veritatem cognoscat de Deo, et ad hoc quod in societate vivat*).[20]

Since these principles, arrived at by rational reflection, are derived from the constitution of human nature, they are objective and universally valid. These inclinations though are not equal as they are hierarchically ordered toward beatitude, the final end of life.[21] The preservation of life is seen as the most fundamental good, procreation, the perfection of the species, and sociability and knowledge being oriented toward the communal good.

This reliance on the goods naturally inherent in humanity sets the foundation of rightness and wrongness in the general moral law: good is to be done and ensued, and evil is to be avoided (*bonum est faciendum et*

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[17] See Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction,* 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 63.

[18] ST I-II, q.94, a.2, c.2.

[19] ST I-II, q. 94, a.2, c.3.

[20] ST, I-II, q.94, a.2, c.3.

[21] See ST I-II, q.92, a.2.

prosequendum, et malum vitandum).[22] From this standpoint, it would make sense to favor marriage since it tends toward the good of procreation as obligated by reason based on human nature itself. It is simultaneously contrary to the natural law to enact against its dissolution since this indirectly hinders a married couple's natural obligation to procreation and the nurturing of offspring.[23] Divorce then becomes detrimental to human flourishing most obviously in relation to nature's mandate on the proliferation of species.

Situating the family as integral to the communal good orients the natural union of husband and wife toward the rearing and education of their children, which then contributes directly to social and moral order. If this is so, then the denigration of procreation consequentially leads to the disruption of the family, to which marriage is also supposed to lead. The success of divorce inevitably jeopardizes the upbringing of the children, which by extension, affects the balance of social cohesion, an expected upshot of our directedness to knowledge. At once, it is apparent that the principles of natural law starkly contrast the prospects of divorce.

A possible way through which a more amicable reading of the natural law might accommodate extreme marital situations is through Thomas' understanding of prudence in relation to how the natural law is applied in various contexts.[24] Although derived from the natural law, human laws allow the toleration of certain evils, if only to prevent greater, undesirable harms. To this effect,

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[22] ST I-II, q.94, a.2, resp.

[23] See Brendan M. Brown, "The Natural Law, the Marriage Bond and Divorce," Jurist 15, no. 1 (1955): 32-4.

[24] "…[Rulers decide] in determining particular points of the natural law: on which determinations the judgment of expert and prudent men is based as on its principles; in so far…as they see at once what is the best thing to decide" (See ST I-II, q.95, a.2).

while the natural law indisputably affirms the indissolubility of marriage, provisions by civil law such as legal separation can allow prudent ends that aim to protect persons from further abuse, without having to disregard or even violate the bond of marriage.

For instance, if a marriage becomes abusive or irreparably broken, the ethical responsibility shifts from upholding the marital bond to the individual welfare of the husband or the wife, in keeping with the good of protecting personal human dignity. In a similar way, if the marriage of a couple becomes utterly defunct to the point of risking the flourishing of the family, especially of the child/children of minor age, then in view of the latter's good, divorce appears to be the more permissible option. So even if it is not ideal, divorce can even be a moral choice to uphold the higher moral good of preserving personal dignity.

Regardless, it must be clarified that even if such practical judgments can be allowed, a distinction still exists between what may be legally permitted and what is deemed morally good from the standpoint of the natural law. So, even though prudence tells us to compassionately allow legal remedies for abuses within marriage, they do not necessarily constitute exceptions to the natural law's intrinsic valuation for marriage.

It is only that since the natural law recognizes the natural inclination guided by rationality (*naturalis inclinatio inest cuilibet homini ad hoc quod agat secundum rationem*) and those acts that are not prescribed by nature but are "conducive to well living" (*sed per rationis inquisitionem ea homines adinvenerunt, quasi utilia ad bene vivendum*),[25] then in cases where marriage hinders personal growth or leads to despair in cases of marital abuses, divorce may become, a necessary

[25] ST I-II, q.94, a.3, resp.

step.[26] However, such thoughts should recognize a holistic reading of Thomistic natural law that demands both its grounding in the eternal law and its directedness toward human flourishing.

Kantian Ethics on Divorce

Let us now turn to Kant whose ethics figures importantly in understanding marriage as a contract, if only to take into consideration civil marriages that the Catholic Church does not recognize as binding. Kant affirms marriage as a necessity, being one of those legal institutions that ensure the dutiful role of persons to one another.[27] Foremost among these roles is the assurance that the marital bond will not be denigrated by possible conflicts that ensue due to sexual relations.[28] Note how Kant emphasizes sex as a principal factor of the success or failure of a marriage. While from the standpoint of the natural law, sex is good only insofar as it leads to the creation of a new human life, for Kant, sex remains purposeful in maintaining the happiness of marriage, irrespective of the intent to procreate or not.[29]

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[26] See Aurelia Miller, "Until Death Do Us Part? A Proposal for the Philippines to Legalize Divorce," *Connecticut Journal of International Law* 24, no. 1 (2008), 191.

[27] Charlotte Sabourin, *Kant on Marriage. Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8.

[28] See Matthew C. Altman, "Kant on Sex and Marriage: The Implications for the Same-Sex Marriage Debate," *Kant-Studien* 101 (2010): [309-330], 311. doi: 10.1515/KANT.2010.020.

[29] "The end of begetting and bringing up children may be an end of nature, for which it implanted the inclinations of the sexes for each other; but it is not *requisite* for human beings who marry to make this their end in order for their union to be compatible with rights, for otherwise marriage would be solved when procreation ceases" (*Metaphysics of Morals* 6:277). See Sabourin, *Kant on Marriage*. 10-1.

If sex is not bound to the sole purpose of procreating, then in this purview, the spouses can enjoy more liberty in relation to this conjugal act. It is for this reason that Kant stipulates how a couple that desires to enter into marriage must be willing to uphold a relationship characterized by an equal, mutual "possession of each other as persons."[30] If this ought to be the default rapport between spouses in marriage, then a violation of it would come in the form of reducing one's husband or wife into "a consumable thing," or "an instrument for satisfying desires and inclinations."[31] In this reduction, the marital relationship becomes one that merely treats the other as an object for obtaining pleasure and satisfying sexual desires, a means to an end. Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative requires that we *treat humanity, whether in our own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end but always at the same time as an end*,[32] and it is to this duty that the possibility of pursuing a divorce is allowed and even encouraged.[33]

If marriage is only "a contract between two people for the mutual use of their sexual capacities," then from the Kantian standpoint, it is sensible to permit divorce in conditions when this contract is violated, as the case

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[30] *Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 278. See Sabourin, *Kant on Marriage*, 14.

[31] *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:360. See Altman, "Kant on Sex and Marriage," 311.

[32] See Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 111-5.

[33] "Unlike animals, we set our ends, or determine which desires we ought to pursue. Because the capacity to reasons is a condition of all other goods, we have an incomparable value by virtue of our humanity. That is why persons have dignity and why we ought to respect people as ends in themselves." See Altman, "Kant on Sex and Marriage," 311.

adumbrated above may be.[34] Pairing Kant's contractual approach to marriage with the force of the second categorical imperative, one can surmise that divorce becomes not only an acceptable response but even a preferable resolution to sexual related abuses committed in the context of a married couple. It is so for the reason that the duty existing between spouses places more importance on their capability to engage in sexual relations without being violated.[35] It therefore suggests that while marriage is a moral contract, the duty to maintain it is not absolute and, in many instances where sexual abuses are present, can be overridden by the duty to preserve one's humanity and dignity. Simply put, the decision to pursue divorce for Kant is predicated primarily on the preservation of an individual's inherent dignity which must be maintained even in marriage, and only secondarily on the dissolution of this latter which nullifies the contract of this same marriage.

The Kantian Foundations of Discourse Ethics

At this point, the Kantian foundations of Habermas' discourse ethics will be presented to show the concordance that exists between them. The fundamental principle of discourse ethics relies on universalization where the validity of norms, whether ethical or legal, derives from the acceptance and consent given by all who participate in it.[36] The very nature of this discourse, then, necessitates interpersonal recognition, as well as the mediation of the 'legal medium' that recognizes the

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[34] *Metaphysics of Morals* 6:277. See Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 257.

[35] See Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 257.

[36] See Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 197-8.

participants as 'bearers of rights' who can take positions and arrive at a consensus on validity claims.[37] The recognition asked for in this discourse, however, is not presumed or given *prima facie*. The recognition that comes from a consensus is from justification provided by argumentation, which in turn springs forth from communicative rationality.

Therefore, it is sensible to think of a person proposing a norm for interpersonal validation to be thinking, at the same time, that what is proposed is implicitly claimed to be valid for everyone.[38] This approach aligns with Kant's emphasis on the universality of moral law which extends it into the realm of social interactions and democratic processes.[39] It is apparent that both Kant and Habermas place a strong emphasis on rationality as a cornerstone of ethical behavior. For Kant, the ability to reason is what allows individuals to discern moral duties and act accordingly. Habermas builds on this by asserting that rational discourse among individuals can lead to the collective understanding of moral norms.[40]

This communal aspect enriches the Kantian notion of autonomy, as it recognizes that individuals achieve moral understanding not in isolation, but through interaction

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[37] See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 119.

[38] See Ramon Reyes, "Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas," in Soledad S. Reyes (ed.) *The Loyola Schools Review: School of Humanities* (Quezon City: Office of Research Publications - Ateneo de Manila University, 2004), 95.

[39] See Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 302.

[40] "In discourse ethics, conflicts of action are settled by consensus. The agreement reached is truly reflexive in nature and expresses a general interest or common will because it is brought about by a real process of argumentation where social agents concerned cooperate" (Manuel B. Dy, Jr., *Contemporary Social Philosophy*, Makati: Katha Publishing, 2013, 75).

with others. Discourse ethics, in this sense, embodies a practical method for assessing the universality of norms: if a norm cannot be universally endorsed through rational discourse, it fails to meet the criteria for moral legitimacy. Thus, Habermas' framework can be seen as an evolution of Kant's emphasis on universality, embedding it within the process of discourse.[41] Moral deliberation, therefore, must occur within avenues where participants engage in rational discussion free from coercion or manipulation; one such discussion we often see in the courts of law. This reflects Kant's idea of the moral community but underscores the necessity of discourse in achieving moral consensus.[42] The communicative aspect of Habermas' ethics allows for a more inclusive approach to morality, acknowledging diverse perspectives while striving for common ground.

At its core, discourse ethics posits that ethical norms emerge from reasoned discourse among free and equal individuals capable of justifying their norms to others.[43] This communicative rationality forms the basis for achieving consensus on moral principles in a pluralistic society. Central to discourse ethics is the notion of communicative action through which individuals engage in dialogue, free from coercion or manipulation, to reach mutual understanding and agreement.[44] This deliberative process aims to uncover universalizable moral principles that can guide individual and collective action.

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[41] See Reyes, "Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas," 97.

[42] "For Kant it is crucial that human beings think of themselves as belonging to a moral community, of which all rational beings could regard themselves as members. This community is to be united through the concept of a single final end that its members consciously pursue *in common* as a *shared* end" (Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 313).

[43] See Reyes, "Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas," 98.

[44] See Dy, *Contemporary Social Philosophy*, 72.

Unlike Kant's emphasis on the categorical imperative which focuses on rationally-derived duties, Habermas shifts the focus to communication and the conditions necessary for achieving consensus.

Discourse Ethics and the Natural Law

Let us also consider some intersections between discourse ethics and the natural law. Jacques Maritain, foremost among Thomas' modern disciples, suggests that the natural law possesses a kind of rational universality that precedes and presupposes established norms.[45] However, he is also clear about the fact that even when aided by reason, our knowledge of such norms varies in degrees without precluding the possibility of erring in judging whether an act is in accord with its principles.[46] Due to this spectrum of reason's acquaintance with the natural law, rules and norms established to conform to it abound. In the case of Habermas' discourse ethics, universality is not conceived similarly to how the universality of natural law is presented.

It nevertheless parallels the openness of Thomism to the explication of the natural law according to how reason accounts for moral dictates that flow from our being human. This provides the space for Habermas' consideration of everyone's interests when speaking of moral norms. Everyone who wishes to participate in enacting valid moral norms admits one's responsible assent and acceptance of such norms. Such participants become "qualified in such a way that the various

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[45] "The precepts of the unwritten law are in themselves or in the nature of things…universal and invariable." Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (London: The Centenary Press, 1945), 65.

[46] See Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy*: *Three Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 26-7.

generalizable interests of those involved interlock or harmonize—or are curtailed in a manner acceptable to all, if the case is especially dilemmatic."[47] Just as how for Thomas, the erring human nature admits for the nigh-impossibility of perfect rectitude in relation to the natural law, so too, in Habermas' thought, discourses that ensue in dilemmas allow even the imperfect concurrences for the sake of agreed-upon moral norms.

Discourse Ethics on Divorce

Having presented possible points for intersections between Kant, Habermas, and Thomas, some key points will be emphasized to suggest how Habermas' discourse ethics proves itself to be relevant to the issue of divorce in the Philippines. Firstly, discourse ethics emphasizes the importance of inclusive deliberative processes where all affected parties have the opportunity to voice their perspectives.[48] In the Philippine context, this requires sufficient engagement not only with the legal realm and in religious chambers, but more with citizens, specifically with individuals who are directly impacted by the absence of divorce laws. Secondly, discourse ethics encourages participants to critically examine underlying norms and values that inform their positions on divorce. This critical reflection is crucial in a society deeply influenced by religious doctrines, where moral judgments are often conflated with theological beliefs, as mentioned above.

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[47] William Rehg, *Insight and Solidarity: A Study in the Discourse Ethics of* Jürgen *Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 195.

[48] See Jürgen Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere," *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2022), 167-8. doi: 10.1177/0263276422111234.

By fostering openness to dialoguing with opposing viewpoints and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, discourse ethics facilitates a more profound understanding of the implications of maintaining the current legislations related to marriage and divorce as opposed to when such legislations are relaxed to cater to more practical needs that directly address abuse-related issues, for instance. It assumes a space where all participants are equally empowered to engage in rational discourse.[49] Foremost among these participants will come from marginalized groups such as women trapped in abusive relationships, or underprivileged individuals who lack the resources and support to adequately participate in deliberative processes. Moreover, discourse ethics underscores the need for procedural fairness in decision-making processes related to divorce legislation.[50] It critiques existing power imbalances that marginalize voices advocating for divorce rights and emphasizes the ethical imperative of ensuring equal participation and representation in public discourse.

In the Philippine context where legislative discussions have turned into either polarization of parties or moralistic and legalistic rhetoric, discourse ethics offers a normative framework for promoting genuine dialogue and consensus-building.

Recapitulation

This paper briefly presented a reading of divorce in the Philippine setting from the standpoint of three ethical frameworks—the natural law, Kantian ethics,

[49] Such as what exists in the public sphere which is "an inclusive space for a possible discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and a general equal consideration of interests" (Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses," 166).

[50] See Dy, *Contemporary Social Philosophy,* 76.

and Habermasian discourse ethics. This reading of divorce allows the natural law and Kantian ethics to intersect with the salient points latent in discourse ethics, if only to show how this principle's premium for inclusivity, rationality, and consensus building provides more consideration for discussing the matter of divorce, not only as a legal subject but more so an ethical one. The application of Habermasian discourse ethics to discussions on the subject of divorce offers a potential framework for navigating the aspects of this debate that go beyond the realm of ethics. By emphasizing the importance of inclusive deliberative processes and critical rational reflection on presupposed norms, discourse ethics is capable of providing guidelines that allow ethical dialogue and decision-making in a pluralistic society such as the Philippines.

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

Francis Aung Thang Shane

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

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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

[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

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

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[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/december/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 socialization 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

[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

[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 accountability—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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