



## Do populist parties violate human dignity?

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The rise of populism raises a number of questions for political commentators, cultural observers and casual voters, but to which of those questions should we expect the Church to have a response? Patrick Riordan SJ finds a concrete example of the Church exercising her mission as the 'sign and safeguard' of human dignity.

Commentators remark on the phenomena of populist movements in various European countries. The parties and groupings are familiar from news reports, from the *Alternative für Deutschland* party in Germany to Marine Le Pen's National Rally party in France, Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) party in Italy, and Reform in the United Kingdom. How is their ascendance to be interpreted and evaluated? Is it a sign of the vibrancy of democracy, reflecting the growing concern of voters in many jurisdictions that the political system has lost touch with ordinary people and their real needs and interests? Or is it to be taken as a sign that democratic politics has lost its relevance, and is on the way to being replaced by autocratic rule by charismatic personalities who reframe institutions and laws to suit their vision? Commentators divide on this challenge to evaluate, for or against. Is it a positive development to be greeted and celebrated, or a regressive change to be regretted because abandoning prized achievements?



As so often with such large-scale issues, the posing of the question in terms of a single judgement, for or against, is a trap that should be avoided. The complexity of the issues, also because they arise in different forms in various countries, means that it would be foolhardy to form a single, simple judgement on what is undoubtedly a mixture of elements, some

of which warrant approval and others that may require amendment, correction or dismissal.

The Catholic Church has a longstanding theological conviction that her proclamation of the gospel does not require her to endorse any one kind of political regime. St Paul's First Letter to Timothy (1 Tim 2:1-2) recommends that prayers be offered for rulers and for all who exercise power, so that believers can live and exercise their faith in security and without disruption. This was in the context of the Roman empire, when rulers could not be assumed to be favourable to the Christian movement. Some three centuries later, St Augustine insists in the

context of the disintegration of the Roman Empire that the Church is not committed to any one form of rule and can cooperate with different kinds of regimes, so long as she is left in peace to worship God. In the twentieth century, Pope Pius XI reiterated this theological stance in the context of the Spanish Civil War, in which church institutions came under attack from the Republican faction. He wrote in 1933, in his letter *Dilectissima nobis* about oppression of the Church in Spain: the Church 'does not find any difficulty in adapting herself to various civil institutions, be they monarchic or republican, aristocratic or democratic', and that the Church is willing to 'cooperate in maintaining order and public tranquillity'. As with his letter *Mit brennender Sorge* in 1937, challenging the Third Reich in Germany, the pope's complaints were about the failure of the Spanish and German regimes to uphold the commitments they had entered into regarding the securing of freedom. The Second Vatican Council reiterated this traditional position, declaring in 1965 that the service of the common good is the purpose of any political community, but the form of 'the political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free will of citizens' (*Gaudium et spes* §74).

Given this distancing of herself from the political, we can ask how the Church should view populism as a widespread movement. The German Bishops' Conference in February 2024 issued a statement with a startling title: 'Populist nationalism is irreconcilable with Christianity' (*'Völkischer Nationalismus und Christentum sind unvereinbar: Erklärung der deutschen Bischöfe'* [Bonn: Sekretariat der DBK, 2024]). Their argument invokes the dignity of the human person, the topic of the Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae personae*, the sixtieth anniversary of which we celebrate this year. The manner in which some emergent forms of nationalism entail a denial of the dignity of some people who are not considered members of the favoured nation, be they foreigners and

migrants, is deemed to contradict a fundamental conviction of the Catholic Church. To uphold this central value, the German bishops confront this theme in populist rhetoric, whereby migrants, including illegal migrants and asylum seekers, are spoken of as being equivalent to a plague, a source of contamination, an infection of the body politic. All such language reflects a profound disrespect for such people, and the German bishops, mindful of the Church's duty to uphold human dignity, speak out to warn against this tendency in German politics. What is particularly worrying, as the bishops' document recalls, is that there is prior history in German nationalism, when the interests of the nation, *das Volk*, were invoked by the Nazis to justify the oppression and extermination of Jewish people and others.

The document does not only appeal to church teaching but can invoke the very strong assertion of the dignity of the human person in Germany's Basic Law, *Grundgesetz*, adopted in 1949 against the background of the Nazi horrors. Populist nationalism is not compatible with church teaching, but it also violates the fundamental secular values at the heart of German society and the Federal Republic. For this reason, the bishops declare that the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party is not electable.

The bishops contrast two notions that are given Greek labels, the *ethnos* and the *demos*. The *ethnos* points to the notion of an ethnic group, a people united by ancestry and blood relations. An attempt to build a political community on the basis of ethnicity excludes in advance all who do not share in those relations, and denies in principle the possibility of a unified society of people from a variety of backgrounds. The *demos*, by contrast, identifies a community of those people who are equally entitled on the basis of human and civil rights. The German Basic Law speaks of a *demos*, and its respect for the equal rights of citizens as members of the *demos* is rooted in its declared commitment to the human dignity of each and every person.

It is noteworthy that Joseph Ratzinger, who began as a German theologian interested in doctrinal themes such as Christology, incarnation and redemption, in his ministry as Pope Benedict XVI was a great defender of the dignity of the human person. This topic was central to his statements to the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2008, to the Houses of Parliament in London in 2010, and to the Bundestag and Bundesrat in Berlin in 2011. Almost prophetically in his Berlin address, Benedict warned against the risk that popular support expressed democratically might be allowed to override the core values expressed in the constitution. This is the same warning now voiced by the German Bishops' Conference. As in 2019, with their statement '*Dem Populismus widerstehen*' ('To resist populism'), they recall citizens to renewed commitment to the dignity of every human person, because without it the solidarity that is essential to the survival of the political community itself is jeopardised.

The Vatican Council's 1965 declaration invoked the dignity of the human person to ground the commitment to religious liberty. The shift in focus from the theme of truth to the *persons who seek* the truth, and who are capable of recognising and appreciating the truth when found, enabled the Council to find and present a new teaching on religious liberty. It made it possible for the Church to accommodate human rights within her teaching. In the present context, the theme of human dignity is recalled, not to uphold religious liberty as such, but to uphold all the liberties that all human beings ought to be able to enjoy, because of their human dignity. Political movements that speak and act in a manner disrespectful of human dignity qualify themselves as undeserving of support.

When Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* writes of the separation of Church and State, it mentions a shared interest since both institutions are at the service of human persons. But the pastoral constitution declares of the Church: 'It is at once the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person' (§76). On this basis, the Church demands the freedom 'to preach the faith, to proclaim its teaching about society, to carry out its task among people without hindrance, and to pass moral judgments even in matters relating to politics, whenever the fundamental human rights or the salvation of souls requires it' (§76, emphasis added). The Declaration on Religious Liberty stressed this freedom of the Church and of other faith communities also, since the asserted liberty is not confined to individuals. The Church as a social entity, no less than her individual members, is entitled to the double liberty proclaimed in the declaration, to be neither coerced nor hindered in the exercise of her religious activities (*Dignitatis humanae personae* §13).

Sixty years after the final publication of these Vatican Council documents, the German bishops provide concrete examples of what was intended to be the Church's role as 'sign and safeguard' of the transcendent dignity of human beings. They are exercising this freedom claimed for the Church when they publish their concerns in the form of moral judgement about the insulting and abusive language used by some populist politicians, effectively denying the human dignity of asylum seekers and migrants.

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