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# The Bergoglian Principles: Pope Francis' Dialectical Approach to Political Theology

Ethna Regan

School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music, Dublin City University, D09N920 Dublin, Ireland; ethna.regan@dcu.ie

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**Abstract:** Pope Francis (Jorge Bergoglio) is a complex thinker whose political and theological views range from the illiberal to the radical, defying easy categorization within the binaries of contemporary politics. In this article, I examine the influence of theological debates in the post-Vatican II Latin American church on his development, especially *la teología del pueblo*, which was, 'to some extent', an Argentine variant of liberation theology. This article presents a critical analysis of four 'Bergoglian principles'—which Francis says are derived from the pillars of Catholic social teaching—first developed when he was the leader of the Jesuits in Argentina during the period of the 'Dirty War': time is greater than space; unity prevails over conflict; realities are more important than ideas; and the whole is greater than the part. While Francis' work draws from a variety of theological roots and employs a range of ethical theories and methods of moral reasoning, it is these principles, with their dialectical and constructive approach to political theology, that remain constant in his work and find expression in his papal writings, including *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*. They clarify his operative priorities in political conflict, pluralistic dialogue, pastoral practice, and theological analysis.

**Keywords:** Pope Francis; Bergoglian principles; *teología del pueblo*; liberation theology; political theology; historical realism; social criteria; dialectical; *Evangelii Gaudium*; *Laudato Si'*; *Amoris Laetitia*

## 1. Introduction

Pope Francis is not a systematic theologian, a theological ethicist, or a political philosopher; yet, he is and was, as Jorge Bergoglio, a political person, conscious of the dynamic between religion and politics and engaged in that dialogue on matters related to the common good in Argentina. An original thinker, Thomas R. Rourke argues that Francis' interest is in the cultural roots of politics, what he terms political anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Francis confounds many political observers with political views that defy easy categorization, and he has critics from across the range of Catholic theological positions. This article will briefly outline the theological background that shaped Francis' thinking on politics and theology—particularly the Argentine *teología del pueblo*, theology of the people—and will then critically examine the four 'Bergoglian principles' that have been key to his thinking throughout his career.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Background: Argentina and *La Teología del Pueblo*

Francis is a distinctively Latin American thinker, shaped by the history, politics, and theology of his native Argentina. He is the son of immigrant Italian parents. He is a Jesuit formed by the Ignatian practice of discernment of spirits, that is, the cultivation of *discreta caritas* (discerning love)

<sup>1</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 134).

<sup>2</sup> Juan Carlos Scannone calls these the 'Bergoglian Priorities'. See (Scannone 2016, p. 127). Francis, himself, describes them as 'principles'. See (Francis 2013b, §221).

that enables us to become sensitive to movements within us, to distinguish between those that move us closer to God and those that do the opposite, and thus to develop the art of decision-making. The principles discussed in this article are influenced by this practice; however, to interpret his Jesuit background as “the single most important influence on the papacy of Francis”<sup>3</sup> is an overstatement that does not do justice to the complexity of his thought, and it potentially de-emphasizes his Latin American identity. He is also a post-Vatican II (1962–1965) thinker, shaped by the distinctive reception of that ecumenical council in Latin America through the significant meetings of the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) in Medellín (CELAM II, 1968) and in Puebla (CELAM III, 1979). In Latin America, the reception of Vatican II was driven more by the “socio-ecclesiological and political” than by the impetus for theological and pastoral reform that marked its reception in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Francis’ thought was profoundly shaped by the theological debates that emerged in the highly charged political context of Latin America in that period. CELAM V, held in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007, was part of that ongoing reception, and Bergoglio played an important role at that meeting as the head of the drafting committee of the final document.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he was shaped by the initial Latin American reception of Vatican II, shaped that ongoing reception, and brings that Latin American tradition into his papal writings.

The theological context in Argentina after Vatican II, and more specifically after CELAM II, gave birth to what is called the theology of the people, *la teología del pueblo*. It emerged as the bishops of Argentina endeavored to implement the ecclesial vision and priorities outlined in the Medellín documents and is discernible in the 1969 Declaration of the Argentine Bishops in San Miguel.<sup>6</sup> It marks an attempt to interpret Vatican II’s emphasis on the people of God in the specific context of the people of Argentina. The founding theologians of this post-conciliar contextual theology were Lucio Gera (1924–2012) and Rafael Tello (1917–2002). Gera was an invitee at the last session of Vatican II and a peritus at the CELAM meetings in 1968 and 1979. Tello, a close associate of *el Movimiento Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo* (the Priests for the Third World) who lived in the slums of Buenos Aires, *las villas miserias*, focused his theological work on popular Christianity and the importance of evangelization being grounded in the culture of the people, especially that of the poor. Tello’s work brought him into conflict with the military junta and also with Cardinal Juan Carlos Aramburu of Buenos Aires. Tello eventually left his post in the Faculty of Theology there. Bergoglio, as cardinal, spoke at the launch of a posthumously published book on Tello’s theology, noting that “God sometimes makes reparations: that the hierarchy at that time thought it convenient to dismiss these thoughts today finds them valid, moreover, they have become the foundation of the evangelizing work in Argentina”.<sup>7</sup>

*La teología del pueblo* has been described as “to some extent the Argentine version of liberation theology that emphasizes folk Catholicism and political affinities to Peronism”.<sup>8</sup> Peronism is an ideologically complex movement with contested origins, named for General Juan Domingo Perón, the three-term president of Argentina. It has been described as a “curious amalgam of forces not normally associated with one another: the military, the trade unions and the Church”.<sup>9</sup> Its ideology is *Justicialismo*, which is “founded on Social Christian values and has three basic principles: social justice, political sovereignty, and economic independence”.<sup>10</sup> Perón himself saw it as a third way between capitalism and communism. It remains an influential social and political movement in contemporary Argentina.

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<sup>3</sup> (Massaro 2018, p. 43).

<sup>4</sup> See (Hünemann 2019, pp. 18–19).

<sup>5</sup> See (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano 2007). CELAM V holds that evangelization “includes the preferential option for the poor, integral human promotion, and authentic Christian liberation”. (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano 2007, §146).

<sup>6</sup> See (Conferencia Episcopal Argentina 1969).

<sup>7</sup> See (Bianchi 2019).

<sup>8</sup> (Morello 2015, p. 83, n. 29).

<sup>9</sup> (Vallely 2013, p. 40).

<sup>10</sup> See (Rossi 2013).

While it is sometimes identified as a variant of liberation theology, Juan Carlos Scannone, a key commentator on Francis' thought, identifies a number of methodological differences between liberation theology and the theology of the people. These include the privileging of historical-cultural analysis over structural social analysis; the complementing of the use of analytical and social sciences with "more synthetic and hermeneutical sciences", especially history and culture; and a more "critical distance" from Marxist methods.<sup>11</sup> The overlap between the two theological movements is the centrality of the poor—indeed both view the poor as a people constituting a collective subject of history—but the Argentinian theology focused less on the economic domination of capitalism, as expressed in the dependency theory, than on political domination in the form of imperialism (without neglecting the economic questions). While addressing social conflict, its emphasis on 'the people' prioritizes unity over conflict, a priority later taken up by Bergoglio.

Further, the option for the poor in the theology of the people converges with an option for culture; to opt for the poor is to learn about their culture. The poor are a distinct *pueblo*, with their own culture, a culture that is revelatory for the rest of church and society. They are the locus and the keepers of hope. It is in this emphasis on 'the people' that we see the bringing together of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the liberationist emphasis on the option for the poor, and the political affinities with Peronism in this Argentine theology. The category of 'the people' is both complex and ambiguous. It is intended to encompass something that is neither populist nationalism nor the proletariat of Marxist theory. Scannone argues that the ambiguity is "not for its vacuity but for its wealth of meaning", from the people as a nation to a designation for the lower classes.<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to acknowledge that the category of 'the people' is vulnerable to both reductive populist and romantic interpretations, as much as it operates as a constructive political and theological category.

At the 1979 Puebla conference, Bergoglio met the Uruguayan academic Alberto Methol Ferré (1919–2009), an interdisciplinary scholar who wrote on the relationship between Catholicism and Latin American history.<sup>13</sup> A critic of liberation theology, Methol Ferré was an important lay collaborator with CELAM during the 1980s when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published their two instructions on liberation theology.<sup>14</sup> He saw in these instructions "an affirmation of other trends in the region concerning theological reflection on liberalism".<sup>15</sup> Methol Ferré was very influential on Bergoglio's thought, particularly with respect to his understanding of the relationship between the universal and the local in ecclesiology, and with respect to the question of the problematic dimension of the political ideologies of both the left and the right. The Puebla document warned against both "capitalist liberalism" and "Marxist collectivism".<sup>16</sup> This concern about the shadow side of Enlightenment rationality was part of the theology of the people, which viewed both of these political philosophies as "two branches of the same rationality that held the unenlightened culture of the people in a critical light".<sup>17</sup>

However, those who present liberation theology as the imposition of alien enlightenment philosophies overlook the fact the liberation theologians, while recognizing the liberative intentions of the politics born of the Enlightenment, were critical of what they saw as an emphasis on individual liberties to the neglect of structural poverty and injustice. They raised crucial questions about the true beneficiaries of the liberal universalist tradition. In terms of Marxism, liberation theologians found that Marxist analysis, especially the early 'Hegelian Marx', offered an accurate interpretation of the exploitative consequences of capitalism and used this analysis selectively and, for the most part, critically. While the distinctiveness of *la teología del pueblo* presented itself in deliberative contrast to

<sup>11</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 124).

<sup>12</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 121).

<sup>13</sup> See (Diaz and Podetti 2017).

<sup>14</sup> See (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1984, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 4).

<sup>16</sup> (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano 1980, §542–43).

<sup>17</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 76).

“certain aspects of liberation theology”, to borrow from the title of one of the CDF instructions, and that reflected the debates within the Latin American church at the time, it is important to state that an overemphasis on the distinction between *la teología del pueblo* and liberation theology in contemporary theological discourse does not reflect the rich, mature body of half a century of liberation theology. While it is the Argentine perspective of *la teología del pueblo* that is most evident in his Bergoglian principles, it must also be noted that Francis’ addresses and writings are marked by a distinct fusion of *la teología del pueblo* and liberation theology. This fusion is particularly evident in the way he discusses the preferential option for the poor and in his critique of the effects of economic globalization on the poor and those on the peripheries.

### 3. Bergoglian Principles

Progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity depends on four principles related to constant tensions present in every social reality. These derive from the pillars of the Church’s social doctrine . . . In their light I would now like to set forth these four specific principles which can guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonized within a shared pursuit. I do so out of the conviction that their application can be a genuine path to peace within each nation and in the entire world.

(*Evangelii Gaudium*, §221)

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, what can be described as the programmatic statement for his pontificate, Francis introduces four principles that he suggests are derived from the pillars of Catholic social teaching: time is greater than space (EG, §222–25); unity prevails over conflict (EG, §222–25); realities are more important than ideas (EG, §231–33); and the whole is greater than the part (EG, §234–37).<sup>18</sup> One can argue that these principles are *implicit* in Catholic social teaching—that the concept of the common good is at the heart of the Bergoglian principles—but nowhere in that body of thought are these principles explicitly defined or discussed.<sup>19</sup> This section on what Francis calls his “social criteria” is drawn directly from his unfinished doctoral thesis on Romano Guardini’s dialectical philosophical anthropology. Guardini, a major figure of twentieth-century Catholic theology, was expelled from his post at the University of Berlin by the Nazis in 1939 due to his cautious but courageous stance, as an academic and a pastor, against National Socialism in Germany.

On first reading this section of *Evangelii Gaudium*, it was difficult to appreciate the significance of these ideas; indeed, it seemed to be the least convincing part of the document. However, since then, more material has become available on Bergoglio’s thought, especially in Spanish, and the significance of these principles in understanding Francis’ political thought has become clearer. The first record we have of his use of these principles is in a 1974 address to a gathering of the Jesuits in Argentina where he outlines three Christian principles or criteria for discernment: unity before conflict, the whole before the part, and time before space.<sup>20</sup> In 1980, Bergoglio added a fourth priority—that of reality before ideas.<sup>21</sup> Scannone and others say these are explications of implicit principles found in a 1834 letter of the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas on the organization of governance.<sup>22</sup> The Bergoglian principles have also been described as “maxims for peacemakers”,<sup>23</sup> “criteria for

<sup>18</sup> (Francis 2013b). In this article, Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* is referred to by the initials of the title (EG), followed by the number of the relevant paragraph.

<sup>19</sup> See (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, §160), which identifies the following as the ‘permanent principles’ of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity.

<sup>20</sup> See (Bergoglio 2014). He refers to three principles in the 1974 talk, ‘Una institución que vive su carisma’.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Formación permanente y reconciliación’. See (Bergoglio 2014).

<sup>22</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 128). See (Barba 1984, p. 94).

<sup>23</sup> (Christiansen 2017, p. 214).

discernment”, and “anti-ideological principles”.<sup>24</sup> They were to shield against what Bergoglio saw as the temptation for politics—and theology—to become captive to ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Thomas Rourke observes that Bergoglio, from the time he served as the leader of the Jesuits in Argentina, would always “distance himself” from any theology that would result in political and social change becoming the central concern of Jesuit life or that would “overemphasize ideological elements drawn from outside”.<sup>26</sup> In relation to the former, the distancing was not from the social justice imperative of political and social change, but because of a concern that a commitment to ideology could replace a commitment to people. This concern that “faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies” was expressed strongly in his first interview as pope, although the ideological reference here is to “exaggerated doctrinal certainty”.<sup>27</sup> Bergoglio saw these principles not simply as anti-ideological but as “the axis around which reconciliation can revolve”.<sup>28</sup> These principles are key to understanding Francis’ political thought and also key to the difficulty of clearly locating him on the political spectrum. While many of his positions are definitively illiberal, Francis is not in full communion with conservative thinkers, in either secular or ecclesiastical politics.

### 3.1. Time Is Greater Than Space

This, Francis argues, is a “first principle for progress in building a people” (EG, §222). Commenting specifically on socio-political activity—but referring also to the work of evangelization—he notes that space and power are sometimes given preference over time and processes. The result is a short-term, present-centric perspective that inevitably results in efforts “to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion” (EG, §223) and institutions thus becoming ends in themselves. Francis proposes that priority be given to actions, “which generate new processes in society”, and to engagement with people who can help these processes bear fruit.

Francis draws on a rich tradition of discernment from the Ignatian tradition to the Second Vatican Council’s concept of “reading the signs of the times”. As Scannone notes, “The spiritual sense of the proper time for the right decision, whether it be existential, interpersonal, pastoral, social, or political, is part of the Ignatian charism and is closely connected with the discernment of spirits.”<sup>29</sup> This spiritual sense of discernment is linked, in Francis’ thought, with a historically conscious approach that sees the responsibility the Church carries as that of reading the signs of the times—an echo of Matthew 16: 3–4—and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Deductive reasoning from an immutable natural law shifts, at Vatican II, toward a prudential discernment of the present reality in the light of the Gospel. Francis is all too aware, from his own background in Argentina, that reading the signs of the times is a risky and fallible enterprise: one risks being wrong, not so much in terms of ethical principles, but in concrete situational analysis and the development of normative responses. The call to be readers of the signs of the times is a reminder that the specific demands of justice, peace, and human dignity cannot be defined *a priori*. Discernment about timing and process is not a caution against urgency in the face of injustice, for the denial of space and the exclusion from power are forms of oppression. Time is only experienced in space; space matters and power matters. This principle of the priority of time over space is fundamentally a reminder that settling for space and power results in self-referential institutions—religious and secular—that, in the long term, inhibit real progress in human flourishing.

Francis questions the real commitment in contemporary politics to generating processes that enable human flourishing “as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains” (EG, §224). Drew Christiansen describes this first principle as “a counsel against

<sup>24</sup> (Ivereigh 2015, p. 73).

<sup>25</sup> (Ivereigh 2015, p. 73)

<sup>26</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 65).

<sup>27</sup> (Spadaro 2013).

<sup>28</sup> See (Bergoglio 2014).

<sup>29</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 128).

impatience and for (selfless) generativity'.<sup>30</sup> What Francis describes as the “tension between fullness and limitation” is a challenge of any social ministry or transformative politics. It is a tension that involves keeping an eye to the goal while also being responsive to human need as it manifests itself on a quotidian basis.

The only reference in Francis' discussion of this principle in *Evangelii Gaudium* is from Romano Guardini's *Das Ende der Neuzeit*—a text that he quotes from again in later writings. Guardini offers a single, clear criterion for assessing socio-political decisions and movements: “to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful human existence . . . ”<sup>31</sup> This criterion, for Francis, is the one by which history will judge current short-term politics. While he could possibly be accused of a certain idealism, detached from *Realpolitik*, in his discussion of these Bergoglian priorities, it is this specific principle of prioritizing time over space that Francis cites in his 2015 address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress. “A good political leader is one who, with the interests of all in mind, seizes the moment in a spirit of openness and pragmatism. A good political leader always opts to initiate processes rather than possessing spaces (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, §222–23).”<sup>32</sup> Francis also cites this priority in *Laudato Si'* (2015) in his critique of myopic power politics that, under the influence of consumerist interests, choose short-term growth rather than “a far-sighted environmental agenda” and the “long-term common good” (LS, §178).<sup>33</sup>

In his 2013 encyclical on faith *Lumen Fidei*, Francis refers to this principle of the priority of time over space when concluding a section on the theme of hope in the midst of suffering. He writes of a refusal “to be robbed of hope” by facile answers to suffering and conflict, which fragment time and change it into space: “Time is always much greater than space. Space hardens processes, whereas time propels toward the future and encourages us to go forward in hope”.<sup>34</sup>

This principle is also mentioned twice by Francis in the much-debated 2016 apostolic exhortation on familial love, *Amoris Laetitia*. The first reference brings the principle into the context of doctrinal politics internal to the Catholic Church:

Since ‘time is greater than space’, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs.<sup>35</sup>

It is outside the scope of this article to adequately treat the implications of this particular use of the principle of the priority of time over space, but it does offer an interesting insight into Francis' understanding of the interpretation of doctrine. His carefully qualified statement about unity not precluding “various ways of interpreting *some aspects* of that teaching or drawing *certain* consequences from it” seems to suggest that culture—“the immense variety of concrete situations”<sup>36</sup>—will be the principle guiding these interpretations. However, in this short, theologically tantalizing, passage, Francis is consistent with the parts of the theological tradition that remind us that *fides quaerens intellectum* is a provisional process in which our certainties about the interpretation of the Word of

<sup>30</sup> (Christiansen 2017, p. 215).

<sup>31</sup> (Guardini 1965, pp. 30–31). See (EG, §224). Guardini's *Das Ende der Neuzeit* is cited seven times in *Laudato Si'*.

<sup>32</sup> (Francis 2015b).

<sup>33</sup> (Francis 2015a). In this article, Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is referred to using the initials of the title (LS), followed by the number of the relevant paragraph.

<sup>34</sup> (Francis 2013a, §57).

<sup>35</sup> (Francis 2016, §3).

<sup>36</sup> (Francis 2016, §3). Italics mine.

God can be pneumatologically undermined. The practice of the priority of time over space requires devolved—from the universal and global to the particular and local—theological discernment.

The second reference to this principle in *Amoris Laetitia* is in the context of internal domestic politics within families. Treating the educational role of families, and the importance of not focusing on control of children but enabling them to grow in freedom and real autonomy, Francis cites the priority of time over space. He then offers a pithy summary of this principle, whether operative in domestic politics or international conflicts: “In other words, it is more important to start processes than to dominate space”.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of the shadow side or weakness of this principle, Margaret MacLeish Mott argues that it “allows for extraordinary powers to achieve a new society”,<sup>38</sup> which is almost akin to suggesting that this principle would justify the imposition of a state of exception, a dangerous justification in a world where, as Giorgio Agamben argues, such a state risks becoming the dominant paradigm of government.<sup>39</sup> Discussing the four Bergoglian principles in relation to the very specific issue of Francis’ views on tackling drugs, Mott further argues that each principle “can be interpreted to legitimize a brutal authoritarian rule”. However, she also acknowledges that “these same priorities can be interpreted in favour of the spiritual powers of a people”.<sup>40</sup> Mott tends to emphasize the authoritarian roots of *la teología del pueblo*, seeing therein a populist theology that “follows a populist corporatist framework”.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, her caution about the uses of these principles, albeit in the very specific context of the ‘war on drugs’, highlights the need to critically engage with them and to truly discern their use in the concrete situations of injustice, conflict, and division or in decision-making related to important ethical and political issues.

Although this first Bergoglian principle is an attractive one for political theology, it is also a difficult one to interpret. At heart, it seeks to express that prioritizing time over space commits to the urgent demands of the now, softens processes that a fixation on space hardens, and thus orients us with hope toward the future. Theologically, time, in this principle, is read eschatologically; not ours but God’s, time is interpreted in terms of the already-but-not-yet character of the Reign of God. Practically, prioritizing time over space in the often crisis-ridden world of socio-political action is not so much about pace as about disposition. For the powerful, it cautions against seeking “to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion”. For those working for social and political transformation, it serves as a reminder about the importance of devolved discernment and the importance of hope in difficult struggles between fullness and limitation. Whether operative in domestic politics or international conflicts, “it is more important to start processes than to dominate space.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.2. *Unity Prevails over Conflict*

Political scientist Anne Marie Cammisa considers Francis’ address to the United States Congress to be an example of the second Bergoglian principle of prioritizing unity over conflict.<sup>43</sup> Francis directs his address not only to the politicians but also, through them, to “the entire people of the United States”. He defines the “chief aim of all politics” as the defense of human dignity and “the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good”.

He frames the address on a number of occasions in terms of dialogue—with blue-collar workers, the elderly, young people, with all people about the environment—“through the historical memory of your people”.<sup>44</sup> Francis proposes a type of politics that draws upon the “deepest cultural reserves”

<sup>37</sup> (Francis 2016, §261).

<sup>38</sup> (Mott 2018, p. 87).

<sup>39</sup> See (Agamben 2005).

<sup>40</sup> (Mott 2018, p. 87).

<sup>41</sup> (Mott 2018, p. 85).

<sup>42</sup> (Francis 2016, §261).

<sup>43</sup> (Cammisa 2018, p. 143).

<sup>44</sup> (Francis 2015b).

of the United States, a remembering of great Americans—Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton—who “offer us a way of seeing and interpreting reality” even in the midst of conflict. These four figures, in different ways with different views of the relationship between religion and politics, were rigorous political and social activists, challenging conflict and injustice on the basis of a dream: “Lincoln, liberty; Martin Luther King, liberty in plurality and non-exclusion; Dorothy Day, social justice and the rights of persons; and Thomas Merton, the capacity for dialogue and openness to God.” Francis presents a rich socio-political heritage that can be drawn upon to heal the many wounds of the contemporary world, including new global forms of slavery, hostility to refugees, environmental degradation, and extreme poverty.

We see here echoes of Johann Baptist Metz’s understandings of the role of memory in political theology. Memory operates as both a category of salvation of identity and a category of liberation. Memory becomes a source of opposition and imaginative resistance to any form of refusal of the subjectivity of the human person. Memory offers political life a new moral imagination, challenging politics to move toward “uncalculating partisanship on behalf of the weak and underrepresented”.<sup>45</sup>

Cammissa observes, however, that while the pope calls for dialogue as part of the enactment of this principle in politics, on the specific question of the death penalty, he does not invite dialogue but uses the word “advocate”.<sup>46</sup>

This conviction has led me, from the beginning of my ministry, to advocate at different levels for the global abolition of the death penalty. I am convinced that this way is the best, since every life is sacred, every human person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes. Recently my brother bishops here in the United States renewed their call for the abolition of the death penalty. Not only do I support them, but I also offer encouragement to all those who are convinced that a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.<sup>47</sup>

Francis’ focus on the human person in his/her deepest dignity bypasses the call for dialogue when advocating for those who cannot speak for themselves or those whose dignity is undermined by violence, both innocent and guilty. The prophetic voice is called for when human dignity is undermined.

A new moral political imagination forged by redemptive historical memory must enable the prioritizing of unity over conflict, understanding that this prioritization is a complex, pragmatic, and often costly, decision. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis describes three ways of responding to conflict: looking away, embracing it to the point of self-destruction, and “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process . . . In this way it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity” (EG, §227–28).

This principle of the priority of unity over conflict is woven throughout Bergoglio’s work. Rafael Luciani notes that the promotion of unity emerged as a Bergoglian priority in the context of the political and ecclesial conflicts of 1970s Argentina. He “proposed the promotion of a *greater unity* at this juncture, understanding that the common good is more important than each position and each individual option, which he refers to as the ‘parts’”.<sup>48</sup> The complex analysis of Bergoglio’s role as the Jesuit leader in Argentina during the period of the ‘Dirty War’ (1976–83), when the country was ruled by one of the most repressive of the Latin American dictatorships, often centers around his willingness “to face conflict head on”. Assessments run a continuum from the hagiographical to the

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<sup>45</sup> (Metz 1980, pp. 117–18).

<sup>46</sup> (Cammissa 2018, p. 162).

<sup>47</sup> (Francis 2015b).

<sup>48</sup> (Luciani 2019, p. 215).

hostile, but what is clear is that Bergoglio was not complicit in the oppression.<sup>49</sup> In a country where, as Gustavo Morello argues, “political violence was a socially accepted political practice, and most Argentinian institutions supported the coup d’état”,<sup>50</sup> Bergoglio quietly protected and supported individual victims of the military junta, carrying out what Paul Vallely describes as “clandestine” acts of resistance. However, even those who offer sympathetic analyses of Bergoglio’s role indicate that he may have been insufficiently courageous. It is evident that those years in leadership and the desolate years afterward have formed the self-critical dimension of Francis’ person. He is a man who has been shaped by his courage and by his silence and by acknowledged failure: “I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Córdoba. . . . I have never been a right-winger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems.”<sup>51</sup>

Francis forged his reflections on unity prevailing over conflict in the context of real, violent political conflict and his subsequent deep reflection on responses to that. The strength of this principle is its focus on hope, which orients both courage and endurance toward unity in conflictual situations. However, it also risks sacrificing victims of conflict for the sake of a version of unity that lacks real solidarity. Nonetheless, the later exposition of the principle is explicit about the demands and possibilities of solidarity:

Solidarity, in its deepest and most challenging sense, thus becomes a way of making history in a life setting where conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides (EG, §228).

Is this reference to “resolution on a higher plane” reflective of a Hegelian dialectical vision of reality? The last paragraph of this discussion of the priority of unity over conflict refers to peacemaking as a pneumatologically founded enterprise that “overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis” (EG, §230). By synthesis, Francis seems to mean that, out of conflict, we can, with the help of the Spirit, make peace toward a “reconciled diversity”. We noted Bergoglio’s desire to write a doctoral thesis on Guardini’s understanding of the dialectical dynamism of opposites (Scannone argues, “not in the Hegelian or Marxist sense”),<sup>52</sup> its application in history, and its relationship with Christ. However, it is impossible to say categorically that Bergoglio’s original conception of these principles is completely uninfluenced by Hegelian idealism or even by Marxism. Nonetheless, his reflections on dialectics are profoundly theological and also grounded in reality. He leaves the final words in this discussion (EG, §230) to a citation from the bishops of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who write about the priority of unity over conflict, not in a theoretical framework, but in a context where it is said that 5.4 million people have died since 1998 as a result of conflict and the resulting humanitarian crises: “Our ethnic diversity is our wealth . . . It is only in unity, through conversion of hearts and reconciliation, that we will be able to help our country to develop on all levels”.<sup>53</sup>

In *Laudato Si’*, this principle is cited in the discussion of the relationship between politics and economics (LS, §198). While each has their own legitimate autonomy, conflicts between them often obscure the urgent issues of caring for the environment and protecting those most vulnerable. In light of the crisis affecting “our common home”, Francis calls for “forms of interaction directed to the common good”.

<sup>49</sup> See (Klaiber 1998). For a sociological analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in Argentina during the ‘Dirty War’, not focused on Bergoglio’s role, see (Morello 2015). Morello examines the varieties of Catholicism and the different stances believers—victims, perpetrators, and the official Church—took in the face of state terrorism.

<sup>50</sup> (Morello 2015, p. 6).

<sup>51</sup> (Spadaro 2013). Bergoglio was sent into internal exile for two years in the Argentine city of Córdoba.

<sup>52</sup> (Scannone 2016, n. 35, p. 129).

<sup>53</sup> See (Comité Permanent De La Conférence Épiscopale Nationale Du Congo. 2012. Message sur la situation sécuritaire dans le pay, §11).

In this principle, Francis shows the influence of *la teología del pueblo*, which, while acknowledging class conflict as a reflection of structural injustice in Latin America, did not allow that to become the defining hermeneutic for reading and responding to reality. Scannone argues that Francis is not just influenced by the priority of unity in the theology of the people, “but [he] also gives it a more profound, more evangelical, and more theological meaning.”<sup>54</sup> The theological and anthropological unity of this principle is articulated in *Lumen Fidei*. The theological conviction “that goodness is always prior to and more powerful than evil” renders forgiveness possible.<sup>55</sup> The anthropological conviction that conflict can be faced, resolved, and form “part of progress towards unity” renders peace possible. Forgiveness and peace are the potential fruits beyond pragmatic political synthesis.

The shadow side or weakness of this principle consists in the danger that prioritizing unity could result in discouraging or suppressing difference and dissent, or the suffering of victims could be obliterated or minimized in the name of peace and unity. Post-conflict situations, for example, require not only peace agreements but also robust and comprehensive systems of transitional justice. Francis’ emphasis on unity is not about giving unity priority over conflict in such a way that negates or minimizes the reality of conflict, but it is about the hope that unity will prevail over conflict—that in the midst of conflict this hope will shape the priorities of those involved. Francis describes unity as “diversified and life-giving”. Thus, it is not simply unity as defined by the majority, the powerful, or the victors.

### 3.3. Realities Are More Important Than Ideas

Scannone, writing on the relationship of these principles to the theology of the people, notes that he does not see “an immediate connection” between this priority and *la teología del pueblo*, “except perhaps for the criticism it levels against ideologies”.<sup>56</sup> An immediate connection with classical epistemology may not also be obvious. It can be argued that this principle is, in fact, an example of the fusion between liberation theology and the theology of the people—a fusion that is insufficiently acknowledged in the analysis of Francis’ thought. Anyone who has worked in Latin America knows the emphasis on engagement with *la realidad* that is central to theological reflection there. Liberation theology is not only concerned with reality as manifested at the macro level of economics and politics but also with the micro-reality of daily life and struggle—*lo cotidiano*—particularly of the poor and marginalized. It is this emphasis that shapes Francis’ conception of the priority of reality over ideas.

His fellow Jesuit, Ignacio Ellacuría, the martyr philosopher and theologian of the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador, offers the most incisive philosophical justification for this method of liberation theology. He was influenced by the primacy of the concept of reality in the philosophy of historical realism of the Spanish philosopher Xavier Zubiri. Ellacuría emphasized that the formal structure of understanding necessitates facing reality, ethically appreciating reality, and responding practically to the demands of that reality. He offers a threefold methodological description of our confrontation with and prudential discernment of reality: realizing the weight of reality (*el hacerse cargo de la realidad*), shouldering the weight of reality (*el cargar con la realidad*), and taking charge of the weight of reality (*el encargarse de la realidad*).<sup>57</sup> The epistemological realism of Francis is in line with this Zubirian historical realism, as interpreted theologically, by Ellacuría.

Francis’ discussion of the primacy of reality includes a caution regarding the “various forms of masking reality” (EG, §231). The only Platonic allusion in the document—to the dialogue in the *Gorgias* where Socrates says that cookery simulates the disguise of medicine and pretends to know what is best for the body—is cited in the discussion about ideas disconnected from realities and the consequent manipulation of the truth: “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms

<sup>54</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 129).

<sup>55</sup> (Francis 2013a, §55).

<sup>56</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 129).

<sup>57</sup> (Ellacuría 1975, p. 419). Translation mine.

of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason" (EG, §232). Ultimately, for Francis, ideas are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis (EG, §232). Ellacuría's methodology of historical realism points toward a practical way of implementing this principle of the primacy of reality over ideas.

This principle is also cited in *Laudato Si'* when Francis writes of the importance of dialogue between the various ecological movements, which are sometimes divided by ideological conflicts: "The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which demands patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that 'realities are greater than ideas'" (LS, §201). Christiansen argues that this principle of the primacy of reality over ideas is where Francis' pragmatism—evident in all four principles—"comes decisively into play".<sup>58</sup> In 2001, at a time of deep economic crisis, Bergoglio, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, supported the formation of the Argentine Dialogue Board (*Mesa del Diálogo Argentino*), a dialogue that engaged politicians, trade unionists, business people, and social groups about the pressing problems of the country. Rourke describes Bergoglio as constructing "a wide tent of participation bringing in a broad array of social sectors, different churches and other faiths".<sup>59</sup> This broad-based dialogue was oriented toward the common good, and Francis now invites an even wider tent of participation oriented toward a common good that extends to future generations.

There is a necessary dialogical tension between ideas and realities, and without this dialogical tension, this principle could be evoked in dangerous suppression of new insights and ideas. Mott's criticism is that "the priority of reality over ideas delegitimizes human rights"; this is less convincing than her criticism of the first principle, but it does serve as a caution about the importance of maintaining that dialogical tension between ideas and realities. However, the more prevalent vulnerability is that of faith and politics becoming reduced to rhetoric. Theologically, this principle "has to do with incarnation of the word and its being put into practice", with the performance of works of justice and charity (EG, §233). Without the performative dimension, incarnation itself remains in the realm of pure ideas.

Without the performative dimension—praxis—ecological ethics, theories of justice, or political visions remain in the realm of pure ideas.

### 3.4. *The Whole Is Greater Than the Part*

The political challenge to focus on the interests of the whole rather than on the individual parts is common in the political vision of this pope. This principle is framed in *Evangelii Gaudium* in terms of the creative tension between the global and the local. A global perspective guarantees breadth of vision but risks static abstraction; a local perspective guarantees groundedness in *la realidad* and *lo cotidiano* but risks narrow localism.<sup>60</sup> The call to broaden horizons and "see the greater good which will benefit us all" liberates us, Francis suggests, from obsession with "limited and particular questions" (EG, §235). This greater good, of course, is not utilitarian, because it has a place for everyone and is not simply the greatest good of the greatest number.

As a model for this principle, Francis offers the image of the polyhedron, "which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each" (EG, §236). Geometric allusions are not common in papal documents, but Francis used this image before becoming pope in his published interreligious dialogues with Rabbi Skorka.<sup>61</sup> The polyhedral image, while not unproblematic, is, perhaps, more pneumatologically appropriate than a sphere. It allows for differential relations between

<sup>58</sup> (Christiansen 2017, p. 217).

<sup>59</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 137).

<sup>60</sup> (See Francis 2013b, §234).

<sup>61</sup> (Bergoglio and Skorka 2010).

the elements and with the center and is, therefore, potentially more fecund for the exploration of unity in diversity.

Scannone sees this principle, with its focus on the tension between the global and the local, as a convergence “with the historical and cultural roots of the theology of the people”.<sup>62</sup> Rourke argues that “it would be difficult to overemphasize the centrality of the theme” of inculturation in Bergoglio’s thought.<sup>63</sup> He discusses how Bergoglio’s views on evangelization were influenced by his interest in the Jesuit missions set up among the Guaraní people in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay in the seventeenth century—the *reducciones* made famous in the film *The Mission*. Rourke observes that Bergoglio saw the destruction of these missions, not only as a historical injustice, but also “as a paradigmatic event in which played out a pattern that continues to the present day . . . ”.<sup>64</sup> This gives us a crucial insight into Francis’ operative understanding of diversity of culture and inculturation and the importance of the hermeneutic of culture in his work.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis offers a beautiful reflection on cultural diversity and the Gospel, grounding it in Trinitarian theology. Unity in diversity within Christianity is derivative of the very nature of God himself: “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity . . . While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural” (EG, §117). The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region (6–17 October 2019) on the theme ‘Amazonia: New Pathways for the Church and for An Integral Ecology’ was viewed with some concern by those who considered this attention to local culture and re-appropriation of a heritage permeated by ancestral wisdom to be a divergence from Christian orthodoxy.<sup>65</sup> This synod, and some of the opposition its perspective generated, highlights the importance of this Bergoglian principle for understanding the transcultural nature of the Gospel and the constructive potential of the polyhedral image for pastoral and political activity.

This fourth principle, the whole is greater than the part, first articulated in the 1970s, is discussed in a radically broader context in *Laudato Si’*. Discussing an integral ecology and calling for a new kind of humanism with “a more integral and integrating vision”, Francis refers to the interrelationship between ecosystems and social ecology as “demonstrating yet again that ‘the whole is greater than the part’” (LS, §141). The whole in question is Earth, our common home, and this becomes a *locus theologicus*. This priority reorients the relationship humanity has with other creatures and systems—a reorientation that presents significant ethical, political, and technological challenges that need to be faced. The encyclical has deep theological roots, translated into philosophical language for a broader audience, with special appeal, as is common in Catholic social teaching, to human dignity—reshaped by recognition of the intrinsic value of nonhuman creatures and ecosystems—and the common good. There is no reference to ‘ideology’ in this encyclical and just two uses of the term ‘ideological’. The first refers to “politico-economic or ideological” interests, which withhold important information that inhibits prudential decisions about new developments in biotechnology (LS, §135), and the second refers to the abovementioned ideological conflicts between the various ecological movements (LS, §201).

Francis offers a stinging critique of politics in the contemporary world, for example, arguing that “politics itself is responsible for the disrepute in which it is held, on account of corruption and the failure to enact sound public policies” (LS, §197). He rebukes the enmity between politics and economy, the subjection of politics to technology and finance (LS, §198, 54), and the fueling of lifestyles based on a misguided anthropocentrism. He emphasizes the dysfunctional aspects of capitalism, the commodification of natural resources, and compulsive consumerism. Although “we are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other . . . we fail to set limits on ourselves in order to

<sup>62</sup> (Scannone 2016, p. 130).

<sup>63</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 21).

<sup>64</sup> (Rourke 2016, p. 31).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, (Farrow 2019).

avoid the suffering of others or the deterioration of our surroundings” (LS, §208). As Anna Rowlands observes, “this encyclical baptises no form of politics we currently see on offer . . . ”.<sup>66</sup> Francis challenges oppositional politics by asking all forms of politics to face the question of limits for the sake of the long-term common good—a common good more broadly conceived than ever before in Catholic social teaching.

The reception of *Laudato Si'* has been largely positive, but criticisms of the encyclical have come from a broad range of positions—economic, political, and theological. Some see Francis as not understanding the need for technological innovation and being too critical of its benefits. William D. Nordhaus argues that the encyclical “overlooks the central part that markets, particularly market-based environmental policies such as carbon pricing, must play if countries are to make substantial progress in slowing global warming.”<sup>67</sup> Strong on critique and weak on solutions is one strand of assessment of the eco-politics of Francis. “The real source of these criticisms”, argues Dale Jamieson, “is that it is surprisingly difficult for economists and social scientists to find a place for values and moral change in their models.”<sup>68</sup> Francis’ challenge to the hubris of unlimited development and acquisition, with the consequent catastrophic impacts, especially on the poorest of the poor, is at the heart of the solution he proposes.

Alyna J. Lyon describes Francis as a “global policy entrepreneur” who “provides a moral global perspective that transcends political and ideological boundaries”.<sup>69</sup> Lyon focuses not just on the environmental encyclical itself but on what she sees as a public and focused campaign by Francis. Francis framed the debate “to move it beyond the simple oppositions of liberals and conservatives, developed states versus developing states.”<sup>70</sup> He nudged and networked, across a range of constituencies, in advocacy of environmental stewardship.

The weakness or shadow side of this principle lies in the potential for marginalization of individuals and groups who do not conform to a particular version of the whole. While this principle offers a helpful criterion for discernment of priorities and praxis in response to the ecological crisis, it would be problematic when dealing with abuse and human rights violations. It cannot be used to trump individual liberties. In response to the child abuse crimes and sins, a distorted understanding of the priority of the ‘whole’ (the institution of the Catholic Church) over the ‘part’ (the victims) was profoundly damaging to so many people and undermined the reputation of the Church. The dialectically conceived priority of the whole over the part refers not just to individuals but involves all kinds of ‘parts’—governments, political philosophies, interest groups, science, business, and the Church itself. Francis’ focus on devolved discernment, on the importance of the dialectic between the global and the local, and on a polyhedral image of the relationship of the parts to the whole stands as a caution against oppressive implementation of this principle.

#### 4. Conclusions

While the long-term impact of Francis on Catholic social teaching, and on political theology more broadly, is yet to be determined, it is clear that these Bergoglian principles, explicitly and implicitly, are at the heart of his thinking on social and political matters. They clarify his operative priorities but give an enigmatic character to his politics. They are not only operative in conflict but are also those that determine pastoral practice and theological analysis. He moves from using these principles in the context of tensions and conflicts within the Jesuits of Argentina under military dictatorship, through a variety of other ecclesial and political contexts, to discerning the appropriate responses to the major global challenges of our time. Francis’ application of the principles *ad intra* in terms of dialogue

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<sup>66</sup> (Rowlands 2015, p. 419).

<sup>67</sup> (Nordhaus 2015).

<sup>68</sup> (Jamieson 2017, p. 125).

<sup>69</sup> (Lyon 2018, p. 136).

<sup>70</sup> (Lyon 2018, p. 135).

and process within the Church does not always match his practice of them *ad extra*; for example, in the broad-based dialogue he calls for in *Evangelii Gaudium*—with states, society, cultures, sciences, other faiths, and with those of secular conviction—he says that “the reservation of the priesthood to males . . . is not a question open to discussion” (EG, §104). This refusal of dialogue with members of the Church on a central, symbolic issue—not the only neuralgic issue within the Church—coexists with a willingness to dialogue with a very broad range of persons and sectors *ad extra*.

Criticism of these Bergoglian principles can be categorized as directed toward three areas: their seeming untheological foundations, their similarity to philosophical idealism, and, in a minority of cases, their potentially oppressive applications. Critics of Francis’ thought, more broadly, come from a wide spectrum of political and theological opinions. Accusations range from comments about his reductive corporatist views on economics and politics to a suggestion in *The Economist* that he is “ultra-radical” and that his linking of capitalism and war is “consciously or unconsciously” Leninist.<sup>71</sup>

An unsettling of political binaries is a common feature of Francis’ thought; indeed, it seems a deliberative strategy derivative of his dialectical approach. His sometimes illiberal, other times radical, approach to issues means that Francis cannot be definitively claimed by conservatives or liberals, thus offering a distinct perspective useful for dialogue in a pluralistic context. His work draws from a variety of theological roots and uses a range of ethical theories and methods of moral reasoning, but these Bergoglian principles remain constant throughout his career—time: it is more important to start processes than to dominate space; unity prevails over conflict; realities are more important than ideas; and the whole is greater than the part. He presents these dialectical principles “out of the conviction that their application can be a genuine path to peace within each nation and in the entire world” (EG, §221). The dialogical possibilities inherent in the practice of these principles offer something constructive for the dialogue between politics and theology in the pluralist, and fragile, contemporary world.

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<sup>71</sup> ‘The Pope’s Divisions: Francis, Capitalism and War’. <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2014/06/20/the-popes-divisions>.

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