



Final Statement on Nation, State, Nation-State



Conflicts between nation-states are all too often fuelled by nationalism and hostile depictions of the other. Overcoming the challenges of world peace demands necessary distinctions based on ethical criteria. The Social Doctrine of the Church provides such a realistic vision.

‘State’ and ‘nation’ are two related but very different concepts. An ethnic group can be considered a people (although in many cases, with a considerable proportion of other peoples) if it shares a language and some form of common descent. A nation is a group of people which shares objective affinities (mainly linguistic and cultural and, to a lesser degree, ethnic and religious) and, particularly, a subjective feeling of belonging together, often rooted in a common history. This group often aspires to a common statehood based on the willingness to share a common destiny. A state is an institution constituted by a community of people located on a given territory and organized according to a common legal system endowed with coercive power, which is independent of other states and, in this sense, sovereign. It was only in the 19th century that states became increasingly committed to the idea that they were the home of a single nation, and nations began to demand a common state for themselves. Multiethnic states abounded during most of human history (as well as city-states beneath the national level). Many such states still exist, especially large territorial ones such as India, China, and Russia. And there are states, many of which in Africa, which lack their own nation but are the result of colonial activities. Their borders usually do not follow the boundaries of ethnic groups and peoples.

Mono-national states are not the only legitimate or even privileged form of statehood – most states are multi-national. Since there are no simple mechanisms for changing state borders and the

process is, in most cases, connected with bloodshed (think of former Yugoslavia), even if remarkable exceptions do exist (think of former Czechoslovakia), the secession of a self-declared nation without the consent of the legal government is not morally acceptable unless that does not involve flagrant violations of basic human rights. In this case, the secessionist move may fall under the general right to resist those governments that violate the basic principles of natural law. States are obliged by international law and the rights of nations to guarantee basic rights to minority ethnic groups, which otherwise may be inclined to secede, and must avoid giving the impression that the majority is oppressing the ethnic minorities. Discrimination based on race, ethnic background and religion cannot be permitted, for example, as far as access to public offices is concerned, and there must be ample space for the preservation of minority cultures, in particular as regards language and religion. A federal state is often a wise constitutional structure to guarantee these rights, but it is not always feasible, be it for historical or geographical reasons. A federal state may be advisable even in the case of a culturally homogenous state, because it adds a vertical separation of powers to the more traditional horizontal one. Disputes over borders, unjust treatment of minorities, nationalistic propaganda against neighboring nations in order to create popular support for the government, and imperialistic ambitions have the potential to threaten world peace.

Even if homogenous nation-states may have the advantage of a more streamlined decision-making process, they should not oppose international cooperation, for example within the family of states represented by the United Nations, or even supranational organizations. The need for international cooperation has increased in the last few decades for at least three reasons. Firstly, economic globalization requires a political structure that is able to come to terms with it. Markets can only function within a legal framework that is not in itself subjected to market forces. Secondly, environmental challenges are – to a large extent – global. Climate change has no borders; only consistent and lasting cooperation among states can mitigate it. Thirdly, international security agreements are more urgent than ever because of new weapons of mass destruction that have the potential of destroying most life on earth. At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity justifies states sovereignty: like families, cities, regions and states must be able to achieve their respective goals autonomously.

When the common good reaches a higher level of complexity, international cooperation becomes necessary. The European Union is a successful example of a partially supranational organization based on the sharing of sovereignty in order to achieve goals precluded at lower levels of organization. Needless to say, all international and supranational organizations are subject to criticism, as should be further developed, and have to increase their effectiveness and efficiency. But they should be improved, not abrogated.

Although in everyday language the words are often used interchangeably, the Social Doctrine of the Church distinguishes between patriotism and nationalism to signal two different attitudes: patriotism – defined as love in one's homeland and the willingness, derived from this love, to

contribute to its development and to defend it – is a noble sentiment, since it is the affirmation of a community's legitimate desire for self-determination and self-government. Its repression is both unjust and counterproductive, since it may provoke negative reactions in the form of aggressive nationalism. Nationalism that is exclusive and imperialistic is a perversion of patriotism. There are three forms of nationalism that should be rejected on moral and political grounds: Nationalism manifested in unjustified secessionist activities; manifested in the oppression of ethnic minority rights; and aggressive nationalism that can lead to armed conflict.

Nationalism can also manifest itself in the international arena by refusing international cooperation, which is necessary in at least the following areas that are relevant for the common good of humankind at large: international trade, migration, human rights, and disarmament treaties. This is particularly true in the case of climate policies, an area that has been irresponsibly left behind so far. In its more dangerous form, nationalism can give rise to an idolatry of one's own state, the rejection of cooperation with other countries, and even the denial of the rights of other states, of the human rights of other people and of migrants. In the worst-case scenario it can cause unjust and illegal wars, i.e. not for self-defense or the defense of allies under attack.

As regards the economy, the heart of the debate is whether the best way lies in abandoning globalization – something perhaps impossible, anyway – or in substantially improving it. Looking at the experience of the twentieth century, it seems clear that abandoning globalization would be the worst way. However, there are not few the ones who embrace national-populism and advocate abandoning or seriously limiting it. Of course, it is very evident that economic globalization needs many relevant improvements as regards social and economic justice and caring for the common human environment. As stressed in *Laudato si'*, the environment is a global common good, neither a public nor a private global good. That is why it requires a special governance regime.

Global politics is at a crossroads. The institutions of the post-war period, created to ensure a peaceful world order and guarantee inclusive prosperity, are showing signs of wear (think of the UN Security Council, for example). Moreover, transnational institutions established in the same period with sometimes contradictory mandates, ended up creating a confusing fragmentation of authority. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in the final part of *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), we can no longer postpone the search for a new institutional setup to govern the growing interdependencies and interconnections within and between societies. Otherwise it will be impossible to avoid dangerous consequences, the most serious of which is the desperate movement of peoples who are deluded into seeking a way out of their difficulties in sovereignty and in the unilateral defense of their respective interests. At the same time, it would be unwise to accept the model of post-national democracy in the name of a cosmopolitan citizenship that considers the concept of nation to be outdated. National sentiment can still go hand in hand with democracy, as long as the latter does not regress towards forms of illiberal democracy. But the rise of aggressive nationalism, the undermining of international cooperation and supranational institutions, such as the European Union and many others, and the refusal to develop binding

international cooperation in economic, climate, and security politics are threats to what is morally and politically necessary. They are certainly not in agreement with the principles that are defended and supported by the Catholic Social Teaching, nor are they in agreement with the prospect of a world of ideal inclusive prosperity.

As Pope Francis suggests, increased and intensified international cooperation is necessary in order to overcome divisiveness among nations, offering new pathways of cooperation and sustainable development, especially vis-à-vis the new challenges of climate change, modern slavery and peace as a supreme good, which today is under attack.