



Final Statement of the Plenary Session on The Uses of Power

Legitimacy, Democracy and the Rewriting of the International Order



“Catholic social teaching regards power not as an end in itself, but as a means ordered toward the common good. This implies that the legitimacy of authority depends not on the accumulation of economic or technological strength, but on the wisdom and virtue with which it is exercised for the common good (cf. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1903](#))”. (Pope Leo XIV, Message to Participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences).

Power is an emergent relational property, inherent in all kinds of relationships, that human beings can use for good or ill; that is, to promote or hinder full human development. Because of its role in structuring human coexistence, **political power** stands out among other forms of power, and it has often been surrounded by a sacred aura. Yet political power is not sacred. Like other forms of power, it should be put at the service of human beings and therefore be subordinate to ethical principles. Without ethical direction, the exercise of power becomes a form of violence. As Pope Leo XIV reminds us, a good use of power requires the guidance of wisdom and justice, as well as fortitude and a special kind of **humility**, exemplified for us in the life of Christ, which is part of temperance. Indeed, “Temperance also proves essential for the legitimate use of authority, for a true understanding of temperance restrains inordinate self-exaltation and acts as a guardrail against the abuse of power”.^[1]

Reflections on the uses of political power are as old as philosophy itself, for philosophy can only flourish if there is room for the free exchange of ideas, i.e. if we secure a space for reasoned

debate which is not subject to the use of force. Likewise, the richness of our common life expands or contracts depending on the expansion or contraction of that space, for establishing a political order includes the crucial element of setting limits on arbitrary violence. Hence the humanizing role of politics, replacing violence with words and dialogue. In this way, **moral universalism** is the measure against which every civilizational effort is to be measured. Throughout history, moral universalism often developed in opposition to empires; yet it has also been instrumentalized in various ways by those same empires as a justification of imperial expansion, arguing, for instance, that the empire reduces the struggle for dominance and violence. This shows that there is a permanent need for self-examination in this regard.

For many years, there reigned a broad consensus about what the **subordination of might to justice** entailed, both in the political and in the international realm. Following the traumatic experiences of WW2, the world witnessed the spread of **liberal democracies**, which, by bringing together the idea of political rights and equal human dignity, were regarded as a civilizational achievement. Liberal democracy was regarded as more than a functional device; it was a practical expression of human reason and freedom, and intrinsically open to ethical ideals and values. Most nations in the world aspired to organize their polities in a similar way, i.e., through democratic forms of government, based on constitutionalism, the rule of law, citizens' rights and accountable institutions. It was also assumed that democracy was the best warrant for prosperous economies and for peace, not only within nations but also among nations. Hope animated the creation of institutions in charge of securing the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the achievement of common goals.

Today, **those civilizational achievements are under siege**. The stable context once provided by constitutional democracy, with institutions designed for responsible and accountable governance, providing guarantees of the rule of law and of citizens' rights, has all but disappeared. The **social contract** embodied in the welfare state, as a modern expression of intergenerational solidarity that echoes a common good, has, under the influence of neoliberal economics, been hollowed out in the very nations that participated in its design.

After decades of democratic expansion across the world, our era has for some years now been marked by **democratic decline**. The *Democracy Report 2026 – Unraveling the Democratic Era?*^[2] records a global democratic regression that has brought the world back to the levels of 1978. Throughout the world, autocracies (92) outnumber democracies (87); If we consider the world's population, only 7 per cent live under regimes that may be regarded as full liberal democracies, whereas 74 per cent now live in autocracies; and many of those regimes which call themselves democracies fail to fulfill some of its fundamental criteria. It has become a trend to refer to these as hybrid regimes: terms like competitive authoritarianism, authoritarian democracy or democratic authoritarianism blend the reality of authoritarianism into (what we might call) the fiction of increasingly formal democracy.

Not only have we learned that democracy is not an irreversible achievement. We have also

learned that the turn from democracy toward authoritarianism does not always take the form of a sudden and violent overthrow in the style of a military coup. While this is still the case in some countries, more often it proceeds by using existing procedures, weakening the system and then exercising power without constitutional checks and balances or ethical limits.

Because of their impact on the human capacity to reflect and dialogue, polarization and technology are eroding the humanizing dimension of politics mentioned above. Political power is increasingly intertwined with anonymous forms of technological power, which replaces relationally embedded reasons with systemic rationality where human beings are almost peripheral. AI can make governance more effective and more responsive to the rich variability of humankind. But such positive effects cannot be taken for granted: under the guise of efficiency, the advance of technocracy could represent a way of denying human freedom, and thus politics. Indeed, the combination of authoritarian tendencies with the use of technological advances – facial recognition technologies, surveillance systems, including satellite-based ones – creates qualitatively new threats. Likewise, an uncritical reliance on AI systems could have a tremendous impact on political legitimacy.

We find ourselves in that kind of dangerous time that we know well from previous history in which demagogues and populist leaders, capitalizing on general resentment, and presenting themselves as saviors, are tempted to **instrumentalize religion** as a way of achieving legitimization. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his 2010 speech to the UK Parliament, “distorted forms of religion... can be seen to create serious social problems themselves”. Such distortions “arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion”, just like “reason too can fall prey to distortions” if not corrected by religion. This is the case when reason “is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person”.^[3]

In this regard, we should recall that politics does not redeem; it governs the imperfect. Its task is to create the conditions of justice, peace, and freedom that make a more dignified human life possible. When it forgets its limits, it degenerates into idolatry. The *civitas Dei* lives in the “polis” without identifying with it; it cares for its good, it animates it, but it does not realize itself through organized action. The historical translation of faith does not occur through an immediate transposition of dogmas into programs of power, but rather through a patient work of rational discernment, public argumentation, formation of conscience, institutional building, social dialogue, and the pursuit of the common good in contexts that are always imperfect. Indeed, as Pope Leo put it in his address to the diplomatic corps, in January 2026, “The City of God does not propose a political program. Instead, it offers valuable reflections on fundamental issues concerning social and political life, such as the search for a more just and peaceful coexistence among peoples. Augustine also warns of the grave dangers to political life arising from false representations of history, excessive nationalism and the distortion of the ideal of the political leader”.^[4]

Likewise, the order based on **international law**, laboriously constructed over decades, is being rewritten, or simply dismantled. A political myopia that nourishes a “widespread tendency to look after the interests of limited communities poses a serious threat to the sharing of responsibility, multilateral cooperation, the pursuit of the common good and global solidarity for the benefit of our entire human family”.^[5] With all its flaws and deficiencies, that order represented the conviction that the use of power and relations among states should be subject to reason and common rules. Now, by contrast, instead of abiding by mutual agreements and shared rules that protect a common space, more powerful nations overtly assert their particular views and interests with no regard for the rest. Growing chaos and global political turbulence hinder the vital work of addressing global problems such as the increasingly clear prospect of nuclear war against the backdrop of the collapse of the architecture for controlling the accumulation and proliferation of nuclear weapons; the climate threat and environmental pollution; the emergence of conditions conducive to humanitarian disasters: the disruption of global logistics, severe economic disorganization, major technical incidents, and natural disasters. Peace is endangered in many ways.

De facto we are witnessing a new arms race: **high technology** is being considered first and foremost not as a way to improve people’s lives, but instead as a battlefield for survival with an irreconcilable competitor. AI has gone from being an experimental tool to becoming a central component of modern military operations. The integration of data analysis systems, digital platforms and advanced machine learning models is transforming the way armies gather information, identify objectives and make decisions on the battlefield. This transformation not only involves the introduction of new technologies, but also changes the very structure of warfare.

In the meantime, the use of **threats** is becoming commonplace, thus returning us to a world in which the strongest is supposed to prevail for no other reason than its economic, technological or military strength. It is clear that respect, openness, and trust create the best climate for reaching **international agreements**. Exploiting power asymmetry within a context of negotiation would seem blatantly inconsistent with the juridical equality of nations, a cornerstone of modern diplomacy. Indeed, the state practice of issuing ultimatums went into decline after WWII, yet now they have made a remarkable comeback.^[6]

Sadly, the prospect of a renewed arms race and the development of new armaments, including nuclear weapons, is more than on the horizon. According to the SIPRI Report Global military expenditure increased to \$2887 billion in 2025, the 11th year of consecutive rises, bringing the global military burden – military expenditure as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) – to 2.5 per cent, its highest level since 2009.^[7] In such a context, there is an urgent need to emphasize the moral duty to avoid war. Efforts and resources which should be dedicated to improving the lot of so many people are diverted to increasing the capacity of mutual destruction. Currently, there are 59 armed conflicts in the world.^[8] In such a situation, it is extremely important that an international consensus be achieved and maintained on the valid criteria for the justified use of

force, which should certainly not be used as an excuse to fuel new conflicts that should be solved by diplomatic and other means, but rather as a way of setting a limit to existing ones. “No more war”. Saint Paul VI’s words in 1965 before the United Nations, later repeated by Saint John Paul II’s in 1993,[9] have recently been recalled by Pope Leo XIV:[10] they underline the presumption against all forms of violence and call us to put an end to all war. Recognizing that the resort to force may be justifiable in some cases – exclusively defensive wars, either of one’s own country or of another that is the innocent victim of an aggression, collective security actions in accordance with Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and humanitarian intervention in order to stop genocidal acts – does not legitimate the arms race. In this grave hour, when a few profit from widespread confusion, the right path is not set by the warlords who entrust their security to weapons, and hope, in vain, to be safe from a nuclear conflagration. It is set by the immense multitude of men and women, the poor of the earth, who, though so often economically exploited by the more powerful, ravaged by armed conflicts, or overwhelmed by climate-induced natural disasters, still keep their conscience intact and, in the spirit of the Beatitudes, still trust in the strength of the human spirit and in the mercy of God, won for us in Christ.

There is no one single reason that explains **the current crisis of democracy and international law**. It is both **anthropological and political**. Looking back, its origins can be seen in a complex confluence of diverse factors of an economic, social, and cultural nature that have eroded people’s trust in various political institutions inherited from modern times.

After the end of the Cold War, we lost the opportunity to reach a new and more solid configuration of global politics. However, now we can clearly recognize that left to its own devices, liberal democracy runs the risk of self-destruction. While it produces great economic power, such power can be easily abused or misused to undermine liberal democracy’s underlying values. Moreover, market outcomes are often widely skewed and need to be corrected. Liberal democracy is especially vulnerable to two related dangers: (1) excessive individualism that is oblivious to the common good and (2) a wide range of liberties that are not anchored in, and balanced by, corresponding duties. As Pope John Paul II prophetically underlined in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), **the quality of democratic life depends on the values it embodies**.[11]

Not surprisingly, as both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis emphasized, the present civilizational setback has been preceded and accompanied by **ethical relativism**, an individualistic view of rights, and a conspicuous disregard for scientific and factual truths in the public arena (*Laudato Si’*, 122).

Confronting the pervasive technocratic forces and reconfiguring a new world order informed by justice and peace is not just a matter of **reforming existing institutions**. It is also a matter of **ethical integrity**. Institutions designed to set a limit on abuses of political power should be preserved and improved. But in the face of new technologies, it is important to develop **a new division of powers** that disentangles the unhealthy concentration of political/economic/technological powers, so that

we really achieve a government by the people, with the people, for the people.

Such re-humanization of politics requires **appealing to the ethical conscience of human beings**, of ordinary citizens as well as leaders. There is a need to strengthen the “inner man” who resists all attempts at the manipulation which conditions his free commitment to what really matters, cultivating the virtues that sustain that conscience. This, in turn, immediately involves **strengthening sound relationships**, which are the original seedbed of political life.

Democratic societies require individuals who are capable of critical thought, willing to engage with others, and committed to the common good. Such individuals do not emerge spontaneously – they are formed over time through socialization, education, and lived experience. **The process of “forging a democratic citizen” is therefore both a personal and a societal project.** Teaching and practicing the fundamentals of democratic action in the family, churches and at school are crucial, and the workplace remains a critical place to build democratic habits. As sources of community, churches and religious organizations create fertile ground for expanding a sense of mutual understanding, solidarity and peace. More generally, the promotion of democratic values calls upon civil society as a whole.

Ultimately, while technology can be used to improve many processes, it should not bypass political judgment and decision; indeed, democracy cannot be technological, but should be grounded in the moral choices that are always implied and required in social relations between citizens. Being relationally constituted, the legitimacy of power can be evaluated according to the extent to which relational configurations generate relational goods – such as trust, cooperation, and reciprocity – rather than relational harms, such as domination, manipulation, or exclusion. This does not imply a single normative standard, but rather a relational criterion that remains open to empirical and cultural variation. For citizens to be sovereign again, we need to go beyond proceduralist views of democracy, devoid of ethical values, and champion the revival of substantive democracy, inspired by the ideal of human fraternity.

There is a need for a global shift: a halt to the clear trend in world politics toward disregard for human life. While every conflict requires specific solutions that experts must work on, we should not forget our common humanity. Rooted in our shared nature, the ideal of fraternity, as well as the resulting responsibility toward our common home, resonates within us all. Recognizing our origin in God should be an additional reason to strengthen that responsibility, beyond religious differences. Indeed, “The Church esteems the ways in which God works in other religions, and “rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” even if for those of us who share the Christian faith “the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 277).

- [1] Pope Leo XIV's [Message to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences](#), 09.04.26.
- [2] https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_lowres.pdf
- [3] https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile.html
- [4] <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2026/january/documents/20260109-corporo-diplomatico.html>
- [5] Pope Leo XIV [Message for the 111th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2025](#).
- [6] Reichberg GM, Syse H. Threats and Coercive Diplomacy: An Ethical Analysis. *Ethics & International Affairs*. 2018;32(2):179-202. doi:10.1017/S0892679418000138
- [7] <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/global-military-spending-rise-continues-european-and-asian-expenditures-surge>
- [8] Zamagni, S. "A way to a new peace process. Against Misoneism". Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences on *The Uses of Power Legitimacy, Democracy and the Rewriting of the International Order*, April 14-16, 2026. Forthcoming.
- [9] https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19930301_secretario-onu.html
- [10] <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2026/documents/20260411-rosario-pace.html>
- [11] "A democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism". Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.