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## Making America Inclusive Again

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## *Trump and A Crisis in American Monotheisms*

### *Spotlight on Theological Education*

Miguel A. De La Torre, Guest Editor

*Spotlight on Theological Education* is a major initiative of the AAR Theological Education Committee and is an important venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in theological education. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, setting, or concern of theological education. *Spotlight* appears as a special supplement to *Religious Studies News* in the spring of each year.

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## **Making America Inclusive Again: A “Catholic” Approach to Our Neighbors**

Miguel H. Diaz, Loyola University Chicago

Shortly after the election of Donald Trump, a number of religious scholars and activists put together some critical reflections on the Trump administration from a variety of faith perspectives and covering a wide range of issues. These reflections were published in Miguel A. De La Torre’s edited book, *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump*. In my contribution to this book, I offered some thoughts on Catholics and the Trump administration. Engaging Catholics in the United States with respect to support and his policies is important, especially in light of the Pew Research poll which noted the following:

White Catholics supported Trump over Clinton by a wide, 23-point margin (60% to 37%), rivaling Romney’s 19-point victory among those in this group. Trump’s strong support among white Catholics propelled him to a 7-point edge among Catholics overall (52% to 45%) despite the fact that Hispanic Catholics backed Clinton over Trump by a 41-point margin (67% to 26%).<sup>1</sup>

The percentage of Catholics, however, who voted for Trump from Latino/a, African-American, Asian-American and other marginalized communities paints a different story and points to a fact often forgotten: the majority of Catholics who compose the present and future of the Catholic Church—although currently poorly represented within the leadership of the Church and its institutions—did not support the election of Mr. Trump. I do not point out this fact in an effort to pit one Catholic group against another. That would only contribute to what is already a deeply divided and polarized faith community that in many ways reflects our deeply divided nation. Rather, I simply point out this fact as a way to lift up the “catholicity” of the Roman Catholic faith community here in the United States with respect to socio-political issues. But even more importantly, regardless of where Catholics stand in the realm of politics, Catholics have an ethical obligation to hear the cry of the poor (Matthew 25), just as God hears their cry (Psalm 34). Issues of race, of poverty, of incarceration, of profiling, of protecting the earth, of immigration—all these touch upon the dignity and health of God’s creatures. Becoming a faithful citizen necessarily implies supporting and voting in accordance with this Judeo-Christian principle.

At the 2017 AAR Annual Meeting in Boston, I summarized some of the key arguments from my chapter in De La Torre’s book entitled, “Who is my Neighbor: Catholics and the Trump Administration.” Highlighting Catholic social teaching and in a particular way, Pope Francis’s papal teaching, I underscored the Pope’s central teaching, namely, the condemnation of human indifference. Undoubtedly, this teaching, which stems from his Jesuit background and Latin American roots, seeks to

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, “How the Faithful Vote: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis, Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

discern the presence of God in all things but especially in those creatures, who, like Jesus, suffer the yoke of the cross. Pope Francis has devoted much of his energy to defending the life of the poor, the life of marginalized communities, the life of immigrants, and the life of our impoverished and increasingly fragile and neglected earth.

On his first trip outside of Rome, Pope Francis chose the island of Lampedusa to preside at a Mass for immigrants. His homily focused on condemning human indifference, especially with respect to immigrants. Similar to our Ellis Island, the island of Lampedusa in southern Italy is where African immigrants first enter the European Union after fleeing from various socio-political, economic, and environmental hardships. Commenting on the book of Genesis, the Pope's homily offers a theological reading of the human condition after the fall of Adam and Eve and attributes to this postlapsarian condition the proclivity of human beings to turn away from loving their neighbors. Three questions frame Pope Francis's homily: 1) Where are you, Adam? 2) Where is your brother? and 3) Who among us has wept for these things and things like this (referring to the tragedy of migrants)?<sup>2</sup>

The Pope argues that Adam's disorientation or "loss of place in creation" prevents him from understanding and living in right relationship with self and with others. He associates dislocation and disorientation with the experience that comes with the human failure to live in right relationship with God and one's neighbor. As a consequence of sin, people fail to recognize their God-given orientation toward their neighbors. In the Pope's mind, this disorientation causes particular human persons to displace their creator, creating a false sense of human greatness and power. "The dream of being powerful, of being as great as God, even of being God," the Pope warns, "leads to a chain of errors that is a chain of death, leads to shedding the blood of the brother!"<sup>3</sup>

Pursuing my objective of relating Catholic faith to the proposed and actualized policies of President Donald Trump's administration, I argued that the president's policies threaten life in various forms and stages (especially with respect to particular human communities within and outside the United States and with respect to care of our planet). Rooted in Pope Francis' teaching, and more specifically, in his Christian theological anthropology derived from the book of Genesis, I argued that Mr. Trump's excessive capitalistic focus on economic competition and profit promotes a false and reductionist understanding of what it means to be human (*homo economicus*). His vision to put "America First" is dangerous not only because it politically undermines global interdependence and the kind of international relationships needed to sustain various forms of creaturely and communal life in our planet, but, judged theologically, his political vision stands in opposition to fundamental affirmations of our Judeo-Christian tradition.

The cornerstone of Christian teaching is the love of God and neighbor. Because human persons are political creatures (as Aristotle rightly argued in his *Politics*), loving one's neighbor necessarily includes social-political engagement. While not serving as a blueprint for particular political parties or policies, this central Christian teaching, which lies at the heart of Pope's Francis' papacy, offers a Christian signpost that can guide communities and nations to map out political policies that measure greatness as rooted in human dignity rather than in profit, in compassion rather than in apathy, and in bridge-building rather than in wall-building human actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, "Homily of Holy Father Francis," *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, July 8, 2013, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



Over a year later after Mr. Trump has been in office, our country's greatness has lessened. Within the realm of national and international relations we have entered unprecedented and uncharted territory. I noted in my conclusion to the chapter in De La Torre's book that during his inaugural speech, President Trump underscored the need to return power to the people and vowed that, "The forgotten men and women will be forgotten no more." I voiced my concern then that Mr. Trump's vision for America would only threaten the lives of those already vulnerable communities, whether in urban or other areas. Only a short year later, threats to vulnerable populations continue to rise.

Neither those who live in cities nor those hard working families in rural America will reap the benefit of the recently passed tax code that favors those on top of the economic ladder. Adding insult to injury, significant budget cuts have been predicted to increase health risks to various populations, having the most severe effects on poor and marginalized communities. This kind of economic policy enshrines an already tested and failed trickle-down economic vision that Pope Francis has characterized as an economy that kills innocent lives.<sup>4</sup>

But the threat to living a decent life and to human dignity goes beyond economic policies. The policies of the current administration continue to set off alarm bells with respect to basic human rights. Despite strong national support for DACA immigrants, and for enacting immigration reform, as of February 2018, this administration has sabotaged every bipartisan effort to protect these human lives from deportation and human exploitation. Persons within the LGBTQI community, especially transgender persons; women who have suffered from sexual violence and harassment; religious minorities, especially Jewish- and Muslim-Americans; and youth in this nation, threatened and killed by gun violence—all of these persons feel America's greatness chipped away in Mr. Trump's America. In the face of a White House that refuses to take action on behalf of vulnerable populations and the common good of this nation, preferring instead to attack the freedom of the press and perpetuate the ideology of "fake news," the people of this nation continue to march for justice, and through grassroots organizing, ordinary men and women are seeking to change the course of Mr. Trump's exclusive vision for America.

Internationally, the policies of the Trump administration have already created much harm, even with respect to our most trusted allies. The administration has basically ignored or denounced time-standing diplomatic practices and ways of cooperating on global challenges with our partners. President Trump's disavowal of the nuclear arms deal with Iran, his ongoing dangerous tweets with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, and his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement (despite international appeals not to do so, including from the Vatican and from scientists who have provided evidence that climate change is real and not fake news<sup>5</sup>) all provide concrete examples of how his policies threaten life not only here at home in the United States, but also within the place Pope Francis has called "our common home."

These national and international policies will continue to affect concrete human lives. Of course, they

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<sup>4</sup> On Trump's massive cuts, see Allan Coukell, "Proposed Budget Cuts' Potential Effect on Public Health," The Pew Charitable Trusts, June 7, 2017, <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/analysis/2017/06/07/proposed-budget-cuts-potential-effect-on-public-health>.

On Pope Francis's use of the phrase "economies that kill," see Francis, *Evangelli Gaudium*. Vatican Website, 2013, 53–54, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

<sup>5</sup> See R. S. Nerem et al., "Climate-change-driven Accelerated Sea-level Rise Detected in the Altimeter Era," Proceedings of the *National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, February 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1717312115>.

carry the greatest impact on vulnerable populations who live across this earth. The question of neglecting to care for vulnerable populations and neglecting to care for the future of this planet led me one year ago, and leads me once again, to conclude my reflections with questions of power: “Who is ostracized based on arbitrary criteria determining the norm? Who is privileged and who is excluded when a particular norm is assumed as common? Who is silenced? Who loses agency? Who are the gatekeepers controlling access?”<sup>6</sup>

Our country will be made great again when power is at the service of making America “catholic” again. As faithful Christian citizens of these United States, we have an ethical mandate to advance this cause. Writing now *from* and *to* my Catholic faith community, I invite Catholics to consider that we cannot contribute to the work of perfecting our union, of creating oneness from our increasingly diversified national body (*e pluribus unum*), if we don’t do everything personally and politically speaking to support just action and legislation that protects and defends the dignity of all persons, especially and preferentially, the least of our brothers and sisters in whom we must see the face of Christ (Matthew 25:40).

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<sup>6</sup> Carmen Nanko-Fernández, *Theologizing en Espanish: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 19–20.