

Globalization, Sovereignty and Common Sense

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Two days ago I took part in the 2026 Estoril Political Forum. It was one of those conversations one is grateful for: honest intellectual debate, without haste, in which ideas are genuinely tested against one another. The panel brought together academics, public officials and thinkers from different traditions around a question that runs through almost every contemporary political debate: how do globalization, political sovereignty and public ethics relate to one another?

What follows grew out of that conversation.

A contradiction that defines our age

We live in strange times. Humanity has never been so connected: supply chains cross continents, financial decisions made in one capital shake markets thousands of miles away, and new technologies have compressed time and space in ways earlier generations could scarcely have imagined.

Yet at the same time we are witnessing a remarkable resurgence of national claims, demands for effective political control and growing concern about the loss of states' strategic autonomy.

For decades it was assumed that globalization would inevitably lead to an increasingly integrated world in which borders would gradually lose relevance and national identities would be absorbed by supranational structures. It is now clear that this prediction was, at the very least, premature.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how fragile global supply chains, optimized obsessively for economic efficiency, were when faced with unexpected disruption. Then came the war in Ukraine, Europe's energy crisis and trade tensions between the United States and China. The war involving the United States and Israel against Iran has added another dimension of fragility: intermittent disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one fifth of the world's oil passes, has shown how quickly energy interdependence can become strategic dependence.

Globalization has created real prosperity. It has also created real vulnerabilities. This tension contains one of the fundamental questions of our time.

The return of sovereignty

Much of international politics over the past decade can be read as a reaction to the limits of globalization at its most intense. American reindustrialization, the European Union's strategic-autonomy policies, the rise of sovereignist movements and efforts to secure critical supply chains are different expressions of the same phenomenon.

Societies have rediscovered something forgotten during the height of globalizing optimism: not everything can be subordinated to economic efficiency. Energy matters. Food security matters. Industrial capacity matters. Borders matter. Above all, a political community's ability to make decisions about its own future matters.

It would nevertheless be wrong to interpret the return of sovereignty merely as nostalgia or defensiveness. It often expresses a deeper and legitimate conviction: citizens have the right to preserve the institutions, customs and bonds that make shared life possible. Politics is not only technical management; it is also stewardship of a common inheritance.

The relevant question is therefore not whether sovereignty still matters, but how it can be reconciled with an inescapably global reality.

Beyond the false dilemma

Public debate too often presents this as a forced choice. On one side stands a globalism that treats borders, national identities and intermediary communities as obstacles to progress and international cooperation. On the other stand radical forms of nationalism that reduce politics to the defence of self-interest and ignore moral duties that cross borders.

Both positions simplify a reality too complex to fit either box. The human person exists neither solely as an isolated individual nor as an abstract member of a faceless humanity. We live simultaneously within different circles of belonging: family, municipality, region, nation and, ultimately, the international community. To eliminate or belittle any of these levels

impoverishes human reality.

This is precisely where Catholic Social Thought—broader than, and encompassing, the Church's Social Doctrine—offers something contemporary debate lacks: not ready-made technical solutions, but a way of thinking. It gives us the right questions in the hope that we may find the answers.

Subsidiarity and solidarity

The Catholic social tradition rejects both radical individualism and centralizing collectivism through two principles that are more relevant than ever.

The first is **subsidiarity**: decisions should be made at the level closest to the people affected by them. Higher structures have a legitimate and important role, but they should support smaller communities rather than replace or hollow them out. Applied today, subsidiarity reminds us that concentrating power is not a virtue in itself, and that global governance, supranational integration and administrative centralization must be justified by how they serve actual people—not the other way around.

Subsidiarity alone is insufficient. It is complemented by **solidarity**: recognition that human beings share a common dignity and that moral obligations do not end where passports do. Political communities have duties towards their own citizens, but must also consider the consequences of their decisions for other peoples and future generations.

The real difficulty is to keep both principles in fruitful tension. Neither universalist nor particularist dogmatism can do so.

Salamanca, five centuries later

These questions are not new. The first great globalization of the modern age began in the sixteenth century, when the discovery of America and new intercontinental routes transformed the world. Thinkers of the School of

Salamanca, alongside their counterparts in Coimbra and Évora, were the first to examine rigorously the moral implications of an increasingly connected world.

Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Martín de Azpilcueta and Francisco Suárez addressed questions that remain strikingly familiar: what are the legitimate limits of political power beyond borders? Can a just international order exist? What conditions make trade morally legitimate? What rights do peoples possess against great powers?

The Valladolid Debate is perhaps the clearest example. Whatever later historical controversies surround it, the debate represented one of the first systematic attempts to subject political power to universally valid moral standards. Five centuries later, the technologies have changed radically; the nature of the dilemmas has changed far less.

A compass for a fragmented world

Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* places these questions once again at the centre of debate. It does not offer a technical solution to every political problem—that is not its purpose—but reminds us that behind every economic decision, migration policy, international sanction and geopolitical conflict stand real people.

People with dignity. People rooted in families, communities and nations. People who cannot be reduced to variables in a model or rows in a spreadsheet.

This, in my view, is Catholic Social Thought's principal contribution to the twenty-first-century debate: not another ideology or technocratic recipe, but a moral grammar with which to navigate the inevitable tensions between sovereignty and cooperation, identity and universality, economic efficiency and communal resilience.

The tension between globalization and sovereignty will not disappear, nor will the conflicts between efficiency and resilience, openness and protection, international cooperation and democratic self-government. Politics consists precisely in managing them prudently, case by case and generation by generation.

Faced with so much ideological dogmatism, we may need to recover a virtue that sounds modest but is indispensable: common sense.

The finest traditions of Western political thought, and the Catholic social tradition in particular, never promised to eliminate the dilemmas of the human condition. They taught us something more useful: how to live with them justly, prudently and, ultimately, humanely.