



Globalización, soberanía y sentido común

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Two days ago I participated in the Estoril Political Forum 2026. It was one of those conversations that one thanks: the kind of honest intellectual debate, without haste, where ideas are truly contrasted. The table brought together academics, public leaders and thinkers of different traditions, and the thread was a question that, in the background, crosses almost the entire contemporary political debate: how do globalization, political sovereignty and public ethics relate?

What follows is born of that conversation.

A Contradiction That Defines Our Era

We live in strange times. Never before has humanity been so connected: supply chains cross continents, financial decisions made in capital shake markets thousands of miles away, and new technologies have compressed time and space in ways that would have been inconceivable for previous generations.

And yet, at the same time, we are witnessing a remarkable resurgence of national demands, of demands for effective political control, and of growing concern for the loss of strategic autonomy of States.

For decades it was assumed that globalization would inevitably lead to an increasingly integrated world, where borders would lose relevance and national identities would be progressively absorbed by supranational governance structures. Today, it is evident that this prediction was, at the very least, hasty.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us to what extent global supply chains, obsessively optimized for economic efficiency, were fragile in the face of unexpected disruptions. Then came the war in Ukraine, the European energy crisis, and the trade tensions between the United States and China. And now, the war between the United States and Israel against Iran — with attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and Tehran's response — has added a new dimension of fragility: the intermittent closure of the Strait of Ormuz, through which it passes about a fifth of world oil, has brutally recalled that energy interdependence can become, in a matter of hours, strategic dependence.

Globalization has generated real prosperity, but it has also created real fragility.

And in that tension lies one of the fundamental questions of our time.

The Return of Sovereignty

The international policy of the last decade can be read, to a large extent, as a reaction to the limits of the most intense phase of globalization. U.S.-driven reindustrialization, the strategic autonomy policies of the European Union, the rise of sovereignist movements in many Western countries, efforts to secure critical supply chains: they are different expressions of the same phenomenon.

Societies have rediscovered something that in the rise of globalizing optimism tended to forget: that not everything can be subordinated to criteria of economic efficiency.

Energy matters. Food security matters. Industrial capacity matters. Borders matter. And, above all, the ability of a political community to make decisions about its own future matters.

Now, it would be a mistake to read this return of sovereignty as a mere nostalgic reaction or a defensive reflection. In many cases it expresses a deeper and, in essence, legitimate intuition: the conviction that citizens have the right to preserve the institutions, customs and ties that make life in common possible. That politics is not only technical management, but also custody of a shared heritage.

The relevant question, then, is not whether sovereignty remains important. It is how to reconcile it with an inevitably global reality.

Beyond the False Dilemma

Too often, the public debate presents this issue to us as a forced choice.

On the one hand, a globalism that tends to see borders, national identities and intermediate communities as obstacles to progress and international cooperation; on the other, more radical versions of nationalism that reduce politics to a mere defense of its own interests, ignoring the moral responsibilities that inevitably transcend borders.

Both positions share the same limitation: they simplify a reality that is too complex to fit in any of these boxes.

The human person does not exist solely as an isolated individual, nor as an abstract member of a faceless humanity. He lives simultaneously in different circles of belonging: the family, the municipality, the region, the nation and, finally, the international community. Eliminating or depreciating any of those levels means impoverishing human reality.

And it is precisely here that the Catholic Social Thought—which is broader, and encompasses, the Social Doctrine of the Church—provides something that the contemporary political debate is lacking: not precast technical solutions, but a way of thinking. It gives us the right questions, in the hope that we will find the answers.

Subsidiarity and solidarity: two principles that remain necessary

The Catholic social tradition rejects both radical individualism and centralized collectivism. It does so through two principles that are more relevant today than ever before.

The first is subsidiarity: decisions must be taken at the level closest to the people affected by them. Superior structures have a legitimate and important function, but they must complement and support smaller communities, not replace them or empty them of content. Applied to the current debate, this principle reminds us that the concentration of power is not a virtue in itself, and that global governance, supranational integration or administrative centralization must be justified in terms of what they serve individuals, not the other way around.

But subsidiarity alone would be insufficient. That is why the Catholic tradition complements it with solidarity: the recognition that human beings share a common dignity, and that moral obligations do not end where passports end. Political communities have responsibilities towards their own citizens, yes, but they must also consider the consequences of their decisions on other peoples and on generations that they cannot yet speak.

The real difficulty is to keep both principles in fruitful tension. No dogmatism, neither the universalist nor the particularist, is capable of doing so.

Salamanca, five centuries later

The most fascinating thing about this is that the questions are not new.

The first great globalization of modern history took place in the 16th century, when the discovery of America and the opening of new intercontinental routes irreversibly transformed the world. The thinkers of the School of Salamanca—along with their counterparts in Coimbra and Évora—were the first to attempt rigorously to understand the moral implications of a increasingly interconnected world.

Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Martín de Azpilcuta, Francisco Suárez: all of them addressed questions that are surprisingly familiar to us today. What are the legitimate limits of political power beyond borders? Can there be a just international order? What conditions make trade morally legitimate? What rights do peoples have vis-à-vis the great powers?

The famous Debate in Valladolid is perhaps the best example of this concern. Beyond subsequent historical controversies, that discussion represented one of the first systematic attempts to subject the exercise of political power to moral criteria of universal validity.

Five centuries later, technologies have changed radically, much less the nature of dilemmas.

A compass for a fragmented world

Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* places these issues again at the center of the debate. Not because it offers technical solutions to every political problem — that is not its task — but because it recalls something that we tend to forget amid the noise of great data and great narratives: that behind every economic decision, every migration policy, every international sanction or every geopolitical conflict there are concrete people.

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

That is, in my opinion, the main contribution that Catholic Social Thought can make to the debate of the 21st century. Not one more ideology in the market of ideologies. Not a technocratic recipe. But a moral grammar: a way of thinking that allows us to navigate the inevitable tensions between sovereignty and cooperation, between identity and universality, between economic efficiency and community resilience, without falling into any of the dogmatisms that today dominate public debate.

The tension between globalization and sovereignty will not disappear. Nor will the conflicts between efficiency and resilience, between openness and protection, between international cooperation and democratic self-government disappear. To try to resolve them once and for all is an illusion. The task of politics — the real task, which is not always seen in the headlines — is precisely to manage them prudently, on a case-by-case basis, generation by generation.

Therefore, in the face of so much ideological dogmatism, it may be appropriate to claim a virtue that sounds modest but that is indispensable: common sense.

The best traditions of Western political thought — and in particular the Catholic social tradition — never promised to eliminate the dilemmas of the human condition. They taught us something more useful: to live with them in a just, prudent and ultimately human way.

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