Catholic University of Croatia

*** The human person: a communion of relations ***

Lectio magistralis by H.E. Archbishop Paul Gallagher,

Secretary of the Holy See for Relations with States and International Organizations

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(Your Eminence,)

dear Rector, Excellencies,

distinguished guests,

On this solemn occasion, I would like to take the opportunity to focus on a question that is both intimately known by each one of us, but at the same time is increasingly misunderstood in today's world.

I am referring to the reality of the human person, of each and every one of us, as social beings, that is, in relation with others. Despite our inherent inter-relatedness, we are nonetheless tempted to isolation, to exclude the other and all that is different from oneself. While the inter-relatedness of the human person might seem like an abstract concept, it is in fact at the heart of all social interactions. In a particular way, I would like to consider the effect that our understanding of the *zoon politikon* has on our approach to society and our sense of identity. Unfortunately, there is a tendency in today's world to transform a healthy patriotism into dangerous nationalism, and this is due, in large part, to our underlying understanding of the human person.

I will conclude these considerations with a final reflection on how our Christian faith offers a guide for understanding our common civic responsibility, and how we might express our political commitment in a positive way.

1. The human person, being in relationship.

Today, in societal interactions, there is a strong tendency to refer to the individual as the point of reference. Society is thus conceived as being made up of autonomous individuals who interact with one another in a sort of social atomism.

However, this approach to understanding society is relatively new. In the traditional sense of society, the focus is not on the "I" of the individual, but rather on the "we" of the human person. For millennia, a person was understood primarily by his or her relationships with others. For the ancient Greeks, a person was determined by the relationships in which he or she lives. In the Latin language, man's "being" (esse) is inter-esse. *To be* is to exist among others, together with others. It is precisely this sense of connection between two or more people which is at the etymological root of the word "interest". It was understood, in fact, that the fundamental *interest* of the human person is "to live together, together with others".

Today the meaning of "interest" may have shifted to a more self-centred notion; one speaks of economic or financial interests, for example. Nonetheless, the word still carries with it a connotation of an interaction between persons. In traditional societies, each member of the community is connected to others and exists thanks to others. That is why it was customary for people to introduce themselves by stating their filiation: "*I am Telemachus, son of Odysseus, ruler of Ithaca...*".

It is therefore unsurprising that the most severe punishment in antiquity was banishment from the *polis* (city-state) to a foreign land, a punishment which was considered almost more severe than the death penalty. Exile represents a sort of "social death", in which the person is removed from the network of relationship which make up his or her identity. In a foreign country, the exile is unknown and unconnected; yet he carries with him the memory of the belonging he had enjoyed in his home country.

However, this traditional conception of the human person gradually was replaced by the "modern" concept of society and the individuals that comprise it.

This transition is usually associated with the French philosopher Descartes and his famous saying: "*Cogito, ergo sum*" – I think, therefore I am. In short, in contrast to the relational understanding of human reality that had dominated ancient philosophy, with Descartes, human identity was considered as an expression of the individual will and intellect. Reality thus becomes self-referential. It is the "I" or "ego" which has the capacity of cognition, thinking and action; identity proceeds from the autonomous capacity to consider oneself, independently of anything or anyone. This marks a significant revolution in thinking. Descartes asserts that the subject (*ego*) first discovers himself. Only after having developed this self-awareness – of which the individual can be certain due to his cognition – can he gradually come to know his surroundings, society and the world.

Today, Cartesian individualism has been replaced by what certain social scientists are referring to as "hyper-individualism". In early modern societies up until the 20th century, the subject was still defined in its relationship to the whole (the community, especially society). Even though a competitive relationship existed, people were still viewed as part of a larger whole.

This is visible, for example, in the French Revolution: the citizens opposed the nobility as two collective "units", one opposite the other; similarly, in communism: the working class against the capitalist system. Nonetheless, at the same time, some common ideal was still visible and pursued, and it was considered important to have a cohesive society to which individuals contribute.

In hypermodern societies, on the other hand, particularly where so-called virtual relationships prevail, one has the impression of witnessing a war of all against all. It seems that we are on the road to the society described in the 17th century by Thomas Hobbes: a state of nature in which *homo homini lupus,* man is a wolf to man.

According to this perspective, the "other" is no longer a "person" with whom to create a relationship which contributes to my own sense of self and wellbeing. Nor is the other an individual whose interests might align with my own and, therefore, with whom I can collaborate for mutual gain. Today, the individual has become, first and foremost, a "competitor". In an overly commercialized world, value is closely connected to production. As such, everyone in our time is forced to "perform", to distinguish oneself through one's actions and accomplishments. The individual is always in competition with others and is forced to succeed in isolation; any relationships with other are, at best, a web of connections with other individuals, based on self-interest. These "pragmatic" connections usually last only as long as they are profitable for those who establish them, as long as they serve the self-interest of the individuals involved.

If one connection no longer satisfies the purpose for which it was created (for example, in a political alliance, in the economy, in emotional relationships, in marriage, etc.), it is replaced by one that is perceived as better.

A consequence of this self-referential and competitive approach is that, paradoxically, in hyper-individual societies, one's identity and value is determined in reference to the other, in comparison with the "competition". That which is common to all humanity and that connects us falls to the background; only that which differentiates and distinguishes from others matters.

The individual exists only in virtue of his opinions (I think that..., I feel that..., I want..., I have the right to...). In this context, the opposition of opinions and attitudes becomes a way of affirming one's own identity and existence. This leads to an ever increasing risk that the opposite opinion or attitude will simply be censored, prohibited or eliminated - not with a legal act, but by the social exclusion of the other and that which is different.

This phenomenon has also created the basis for the so-called *Cancel Culture*, the culture of annihilation, of the removal of the other and that which is different. Thus, attempts are made to censor even literary classics and philosophical works that disturb the "accepted" way of seeing reality.

In this regard, Pope Francis has frequently warned of the risk of what he has called *cultural colonialism*, whereby some societies seek to impose, directly or indirectly, their own views upon other cultures, societies and *mores*. Such an approach does not adequately take into consideration the richness of cultural diversity, and it poses a threat to the freedoms and rights of those peoples. The imposition of opinions and attitudes, even if in the majority, results in an ideology that imposes itself as the only truth and does not allow for objections.

The same tendency can be seen in the spread of disinformation or "fake news". Only "my truth" may be affirmed, while fake news is propagated to extinguish "your truth".

Of course, this constitutes a great danger to democracy. No matter how flawed democracy itself may be, it cannot exist without open discussion and debate.

Reasonable dialogue and discussion, raising awareness of problems, and education in (self-) critical thinking, on the other hand, enable social connections and the search for truth.

These tendencies to "cancel" all opinions that are foreign to my way of thought also help to explain the growing polarization of our societies.

From what has been said, it would seem that the hyper-modern society in which we live attributes too much importance to individual interpretations and attitudes to the detriment of dialogue, the exchange of opinions, and of a peaceful and reasonable discussion.

Recovering the more traditional understanding of the human person would help to combat these selfish tendencies in our modern societies. At the same time, an authentic notion of the human person underlines the unique importance and value of every human being, endowed with inalienable dignity.

"*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*", as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Our universal dignity implies not only that each human person is the bearer of inalienable and equal rights, but also that we have a responsibility towards our fellow human beings to respect their dignity and uphold their rights.

As Pope Saint John XXIII noted in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*: "*Since men are social by nature, they must live together and consult each other's interests. That men should recognize and perform their respective rights and duties is imperative to a well ordered society. But the result will be that each individual will make his whole-hearted contribution to the creation of a civic order in which rights and duties are ever more diligently and more effectively observed*" (n. 31).

It is clear that such an understanding of society and the role and responsibility of each human person is a far cry from the hyper-individualism that we have just described.

2. Person and freedom

However, it is not sufficient simply to recognize the anthropological basis for living in right relationship, and creating a healthy society. It is also necessary to put it into practice. Here, the concept of personal freedom comes into play.

Despite appearances, freedom is not a given state that can be acquired once and for all, but rather a dynamic process that needs to be constantly striven for. While a comprehensive investigation of human freedom is outside the scope of these remarks, I would like to nonetheless make the distinction between three levels, or moments, in the process of achieving freedom, which are relevant for our discussion on the human person and societal interactions. Those moments are: *freedom from*; *freedom for*; and *freedom with*.

The most evident aspect of freedom is **freedom from** coercion to act or not to act in a given way; it has both an individual and a collective component.

In Western societies, this sense of *freedom from* is largely recognized and protected. Additionally, the rule of law helps to ensure that there is recourse whenever such freedom is threatened. We are all equal, that is, equally free before the law.

Yet the achievement of "**freedom from**" coercion is only the first step, which leads us to pose another real question of personal freedom: what is **freedom for**?

In answer to that question, it seems that at least two possibilities exist. Contemporary hyper-individualism, which would suggest that all choices should be in function of one's ego, would respond: freedom for myself; freedom for my wellbeing; freedom for my own success. This tendency to choose the "ego" leads to the displacement or even elimination of considerations regarding the good of the other. Even the complex of social relationships, rights and duties which make up society would be simply a function of the ego.

However, there is another option. Freedom can be experienced in a movement outside of oneself. No longer a self-referential instrument for individual interests, *freedom for* the other enables the person to experience a transcendent reality that cannot be reduced to the "I". "Freedom for" thus enables us to discern a good that is worth freely committing to. And what is that good that enables us to transcend ourselves? There are many values that can inspire using our free will *for* something: social justice, truth, love, worship of God, beauty, the common good, solidarity, the preferential option for the poor... All of these causes have a commonality: they challenge the person to overcome the focus on the "ego" and commit "for" or "to" another reality. In this way, freedom is freely "spent" for someone or something other than oneself. In the end, human life and fulfillment is comprised of relationships and connections, and *freedom for* enables those connections to thrive.

From this perspective, it is possible to build a society that will not be an amorphous mass of estranged foreigners in ruthless competition. Rather, we can return to the etymological roots of society, in which the Latin *societas* is comprised of everyone as a *socius*, a friend, a neighbor, a partner, an ally, a brother or a sister to us.

This opens up the third level of freedom, that of **freedom with**: friendship and love - that state in which people can say to each other not "you are mine!", but the exact opposite, mutually: "I am yours!".

This reciprocity of love is the pinnacle of freedom and is not something static; it is confirmed over time in fidelity. *Freedom with* also opens the horizon to mutual endeavours and life projects: it is the ability to find the ideal of a shared life and commit to building it up together. This is what made Mahatma Gandhi say: "*You and me. We are one. I can't hurt you without hurting myself*".

It is here that a person shows himself to be the bearer of rights and duties (towards himself and towards others), whose value cannot be reduced to a price or to his material productiveness.

As the recent declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dignitas Infinita* says: "*Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights*" (n. 1).

Despite modern society's attempts to suggest otherwise, we all find ourselves in a web of interdependent relationships. Rather than seeing our dependence on the other as a limitation of our freedom, the concept of *freedom with* enables us to see it as an expression of a deeper level of freedom. We can face our inner and outer vulnerability only with the help of another person, other people; we are necessarily linked to one another. A child needs its parents; a teenager needs its relatives; those who love each other need each other; the sick and the elderly need people to look after them...

Both philosophy and religion, each from its own perspective, show that the acceptance of one's own finiteness and the need of the other is always an essential moment of the person's self-realization and of his freedom in a complex of relationships.

Indeed, the human person is at the same time irreducible and irreplaceably unique; From this perspective, a nation with its culture and traditions can be understood as a *communitas communitatum*, a world-community, a place of inter-esse, of inter-cultures.

3. Nationalism and patriotism.

As we have seen, the relational character of human persons means that we will always be situated in the context of interpersonal realities. While this has profound potential, as in the mutual gift of self for the good of the other and for the common good, there are also significant challenges. One such challenge relates to the question of nationalism.

It is natural to feel a sense of loyalty and patriotism for one's country; this is an evident consequence of living in society. At the same time, that sentiment can be taken to an extreme, and fall prey to the same risks of individualism that we have just examined. Some forms of extremism and nationalism could even be described as a *collective individualism.*

For this reason, it is worthwhile to make certain distinctions in this regard. Nationalism can be divided into at least two main typologies: exclusive and inclusive.

Exclusive nationalism is often ethnic-based and elitist. It helps perpetuate autocratic regimes and threatens democracy. Some historical examples are national socialism, fascism and all those regimes that resort to ethnic cleansing to strengthen national identity.

Anthony Smith, a British historical sociologist, considered one of the founders of the interdisciplinary field of nationalism studies, calls these forms of nationalism "ethnocentric". For "ethnocentric nationalists", power and values are distinctive only to their cultural group, and they tend to discriminate against all others. For such people, the nation is the absolute value to which everything is subordinated.

In contrast, **inclusive nationalism** has promising long-term implications for establishing and sustaining democracy and a political system that combines competitive elections with fundamental civil and political liberties for all. This approach does not see the other as a threat, but seeks to ensure access to broad and equal political rights for all, thereby reducing the likelihood of systematic minority deprivation. Internationally, it recognizes the order of nation-states, as well as the right of states to self-determination.

Pope Francis also addresses the question of nationalism in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). The Holy Father criticizes forms of nationalism that are short-sighted, extremist, resentful and aggressive. He notes that such narrow, petty and violent forms of nationalism are on the rise, and they represent a collective inability of individuals and whole societies to recognize that we are all members of the one human family.

Pope Saint John Paul II also criticized certain forms of nationalism in the social encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991). The Holy Father noted that such forms occur when human freedom is detached from obedience to the truth and, consequently, from the duty to respect the rights of others.

It is also important to distinguish **patriotism** from nationalism.

Patriotism is much older than nationalism. Indeed, nationalism could not have arisen until the modern concept of the nation-State was developed. However, patriotism is not tied to a given societal structure. No one would dispute Greek patriotism during the Greco-Persian, for example. This chronological difference is indicative of a more fundamental one. While nationalism is essentially an approach to political, or a political system, typically, patriotism is seen as an emotion or character trait, of love or loyalty towards one's community (lat. *patria*).

History teaches, unfortunately, that this sentiment or character trait can be abused in various ways, fueling extremist or ideological approaches.

Patriotism, therefore, can be considered a virtue only when it serves noble goals and when it limits itself to morally legitimate means of achieving them.

During his Apostolic Journey to very city of Zagreb 30 years ago, Pope John Paul II spoke on the subject using the following words: "*It is necessary to promote a culture of peace (…). Such a culture does not reject a healthy patriotism, but keeps it away from nationalistic exasperation and closure*".

4. Conclusion

Our reflections today on the inter-relational character of the human person, on personal freedom and on the ambiguities of nationalism offer us the opportunity to conclude with a final reflection on political commitment.

In his address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See of last January 8th, Pope Francis said: "*politics, for its part, should always be understood not as an appropriation of power, but as the "highest form of charity", and thus of service to one's neighbor within a local or national community*".

It is from the same perspective that, in the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pontiff presented the image of the Good Samaritan as a model of the good politician: someone who does not run away from problems but faces them, who does not think of his own interest but of that of those in need, in particular, the vulnerable, the most defenseless, those who find themselves abandoned, on the edge of the road. "*Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan.* – I quote from n. 66 of *Fratelli tutti* - *Jesus' parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond. (...) By his actions, the Good Samaritan showed that 'the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions'*".

Josef Ratzinger formulated the central question in this way: "*How can Christianity become a positive force for the political world without being turned into a political instrument and without, on the other hand, grabbing the political world for itself?*"[1].

In a pluralistic society, believers can use reason and revelation to bring their fellow citizens to a deeper understanding of the truth. We are called to live "*in the world, not of the world*" (John 17:15-16). As John Courtney Murray noted, while Church and State are separate, religion and society are not[2].

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the contemporary world, *Gaudium et Spes*, states that "*by virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all men of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church*" wants to be "*a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigor*" (n. 92).

The Christian politician should, therefore, seek to always make reference to principles of objective value, which are at the service of the dignity of the human person, the promotion of the common good, and a renewal of our political systems.

May the Lord grant each of us the grace to be committed to the service of humanity and the good of our societies, so that in a spirit of interrelationship and co-responsibility, we may contribute to building an ever more peaceful world. Thank you.

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[1] Joseph Ratzinger, "Christian Orientation in a Pluralist Democracy?" in *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, op. cit., 216.
[2] John Courtney Murray, Religious Liberty: Catholic Struggle with Pluralism, Edited by J. Leon Hooper, Westminster, John Konox Press, 1993., 144-145.