Populist Authoritarian and Catholic Political Ethics: A Framework for a Moral Review

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Abstract: Can there be an ethics of politics or political ethics in authoritarian populist democracies? Given that politics operates under potentially risky and morally ambiguous methods that involve strategic calculations with some elements of irrationality, developing an ethics of political leadership can be an abstruse exercise. The frequent mismatch between political methods, objectives, and outcomes exemplifies the complexity of political reality and its unpredictability. The existential tension between utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethics frequently arises in politics. However, to address the failures of democracy in political leadership, it is imperative to explore the ethical implications of authoritarian populism. By scrutinizing how authoritarian populism undermines democratic principles and polarizes societies, one can better understand its moral challenges and work towards developing a more ethical framework for political leadership. This article discusses Catholic political ethics in response to populist authoritarianism from three different perspectives: first, it analyzes what populist authoritarianism entails and its limitations in political governance; second, it discusses diverse components of political ethics, highlighting realistic dilemmas in the application of each component; and third, it makes an ethical evaluation of populist authoritarianism from the Catholic social ethics perspective, emphasizing human dignity, common good, and solidarity as key to countering populist authoritarianism. The article makes two ethical suggestions in line with Catholic political ethics to address populist authoritarianism. The first is the principle of social cohesion, aimed at addressing the social, ethnic, racial, political, economic, and religious divisions that characterize populist authoritarian leadership. The second is the principle of social recognition, used as a strategy for safeguarding the common good by centralizing human dignity.

Keywords: populist authoritarianism; political ethics; Catholic social ethics; social recognition; social cohesion

Authoritarian populism has emerged as a significant global concern, primarily due to its detrimental effects on democracy and its role in polarizing societies. The utilitarian approach applied by populist politicians has raised questions on how political action sought to be assessed to safeguard the common good and human dignity. Authoritarian populism has become a significant global concern, primarily due to its detrimental impact on democracy and the polarization of societies. The utilitarian approach adopted by populist politicians has raised critical questions about how political actions should be evaluated to safeguard the common good and uphold human dignity. Hence, can there be an ethics of politics or political ethics in authoritarian populist democracies? Given that politics operates under potentially risky and morally ambiguous methods that involve strategic calculations with some elements of irrationality, developing an ethics of political leadership can be an abstruse exercise. The frequent mismatch between political methods, objectives, and outcomes exemplifies the complexity of political reality and its unpredictability. In addition, the existential tension between utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethics frequently comes into play in politics. However, to address the failures of democracy in political leadership, it is imperative to explore the ethical implications of authoritarian populism. This is because authoritarian populism thrives in the rhetoric of polarization...
and social divisions anchored in othering the other, unsustainable populist decisions, and the absolutism of political leadership, which assumes that the leader is the only leadership choice and that there are no other capable persons.

Generally, it is assumed that if leaders maintain honesty, justice, and a commitment to truth, countries will be governed with these same principles, promoting fairness and upholding democratic values. However, this assumption overlooks fundamental political factors, such as institutionalized corruption, the politics of marginalization and exclusion, weaker systems of political accountability, and a protracted history of political polarization, reflecting a colonial history of exploitation, securitization of governance, and divide-and-rule strategy. These disabling factors are often articulated by populist authoritarianism, which seeks to assume control of the state and citizenry under the pretext of false premises. Many theories along the lines of authoritarianism and totalitarianism have been proposed to explain dictatorships, such as coercion and surveillance theories (Baehr 2017; Tsao 2002; Cheeseman et al. 2015). To further analyze populist authoritarianism, this article applies the theory of alternative leadership deficiency (ALD), which affirms that populist authoritarian leaders often advance the ideology of absolutism in political leadership to convince the public that no other person can lead the country better than they can.

This article discusses Catholic political ethics in response to populist authoritarianism from three different perspectives: first, it analyzes what populist authoritarianism entails and its limitations in political governance; second, it discusses the diverse components of political ethics, highlighting realistic dilemmas in the application of each component; and third, it makes an ethical evaluation of populist authoritarianism from the Catholic social ethics perspective, emphasizing human dignity, common good, and solidarity as key to countering populist authoritarianism. The theological foundation of Catholic political ethics is founded on Catholic social teaching, emphasizing the government’s moral responsibility to the citizens and the citizens’ responsibility to the government. The article thus makes two ethical suggestions in line with Catholic political ethics as a way of addressing populist authoritarianism—the principle of social cohesion aimed at addressing the social, ethnic, racial, political, economic, and religious divisions that characterize populist authoritarian leadership, and the principle of social recognition, used as a strategy for safeguarding the common good by centralizing human dignity.

1. Populist Authoritarianism

Authoritarian populism is a political ideology and style of governance characterized by a combination of populist rhetoric and authoritarian practices. In authoritarian populist regimes, leaders typically portray themselves as the sole representatives of “the people” and claim to speak on behalf of the majority against perceived elites or enemies of the nation. They often use populist rhetoric to control the population, mobilize support, appeal to the grievances and frustrations of ordinary citizens, and promise to address their concerns (Akgemci 2022). Authoritarian populist leaders tend to concentrate power in their own hands, undermine democratic institutions and norms, and suppress any dissent against their authority. They often use tactics such as censorship, attacks on the media, manipulation of electoral processes, false propaganda, and the curtailment of civil liberties to maintain control and silence opposition. Populist leaders manipulate democratic processes by centralizing power within a strongman leader or a ruling party, sidelining any opposition that may push for checks and balances, and capturing the control of key state institutions (Loftus and Gort 2023).

Authoritarian populism often thrives in societies facing economic insecurity, social polarization, and perceived threats to national identity or security. These situations may create a political crisis in the country, allowing populist leaders to offer an alternative voice purporting to be the needed solution. The leaders take advantage of the uncertainties and fears to build support for their agenda, capitalizing on the population’s frustrations at not meeting their daily needs and blaming those unmet needs on the established political elites and institutions. On the other hand, the population is convinced that the populist leaders
have the ability to solve their unmet needs and thus give them the support required to win elections or change the situation.

However, despite its populist rhetoric, authoritarian populism poses significant risks to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The logic of populism is that it is often anchored in what I may call the theory of alternative leadership deficiency (ALD), which reiterates that populist leaders see themselves as the only leadership option and that there is an apparent deficiency of leaders that can pull the country through a social, political, or economic crisis that a government could be facing. The ALD theory is anchored on four pillars of state capture. The first is the capture of political instruments of power through the control of political parties, parliament, congress, senate, electoral systems, and other decision-making institutions of governance—populist authoritarian leaders capture these governance structures to change laws in their favor to prolong their rule or expand their power and influence. The second is the capture of economic infrastructure by making populist economic decisions meant to favor the masses but often failing to meet or honor the target—instead, economic policies are manipulated to favor political elites and their cronies. The third is the capture of military and security institutions through control of the security instruments that tend to be instrumentalized to intimidate citizens or silence any government opposition. The fourth is the capture of the citizenry through polarization between different social-political groups, manipulative political ideologies, false promises, politicization of social identities, and instigation of communal violence along ethnic, religious, racial, national, or political identities. This Quadro-capture reinforces the grip of populist authoritarian leaders.

Authoritarian populism tends to oversimplify complex issues and offer simplistic solutions. Populist leaders often rely on catchy slogans and divisive rhetoric, painting complex problems in black-and-white terms and scapegoating certain groups or institutions for societal challenges. This oversimplification of complex issues can also be deemed as anti-intellectualism that hinders innovation, scientific progress, and informed decision-making, posing significant risks to public health, environmental sustainability, and economic development (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). This reductionist approach tends to neglect the nuanced realities of governance, citizen participation, policymaking, and resource management, often leading to short-sighted and ineffective responses to fundamental issues of concern.

To achieve citizen capture in line with the ALD theory, populist authoritarian leaders apply three forms of populism, which are closely related and impact social cohesion. The first is cultural populism, which thrives on nativism, considering the natives or particular majority ethnic, racial, or social group as the authentic citizens or political friends, while considering the others as the cause of the problems that the country is facing. The second is socioeconomic populism, which considers the working class as hardworking citizens who fail to achieve their economic needs because of capitalist owners of businesses linked to international systems of capitalism. The third is the antiestablishment populism that blames the socioeconomic challenges of the population on political elites and dynasties. The above moralist conception of politics reduces political interpretations to simplistic dichotomization.

By framing political debates as battles between the “elite” and the “people”, “hustlers and dynasties”, “north and south”, “minority and majority”, or “east and west”, populists exacerbate social tensions and erode trust in democratic institutions. Loftus and Gort (2023) explain how the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, antagonized the population in his political campaigns by creating dichotomized narratives between “natives” and “non-natives”. He considered “non-natives” as a threat to the good and success of the “natives”. He divided the population into “enemy” and “friend” by developing conspiracies against those perceived to be enemies of the people, particularly those who opposed the president’s stand and that of his government. President Donald Trump advanced a similar rhetoric against immigrants, viewing them as the main problem to economic and political crisis in the United States (US), as did President William Ruto of Kenya, who, during his electoral
campaigns, narrowed the economic and political challenges of Kenyans to the domination of dynasties and political elites against the population, while, in Hungary, President Viktor Orbán applied nativist populism to propagate ethnic homogeneity, which turned minorities like the Jews, Roma, and others into second-class citizens. Similarly, in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte’s populist authoritarianism was anchored in his ardent fight against drug dealers and criminals (Heydarian 2016). In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s populism has focused on the cultural division of the country into a corrupt elite, also referred to as “White Turks”, and good citizens, referred to as “Black Turks” (Hakura 2020). He has also applied Islamic populism and used excessive force against the opposition (Çuhadar-Gürkaynak and Gürkaynak 2016). In 2018, cultural populism led to presidential success in elections in eight Eastern European countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Serbia, and Slovakia (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2018).

Citizen capture through polarization not only undermines the ability to engage in constructive dialogue and compromise, but also fosters a climate of hostility and resentment among different population segments. In extreme cases, it can even lead to violence and social unrest, as witnessed in instances where populist movements have stoked ethnic or nationalist tensions (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). The rhetoric employed by populist leaders often demonizes perceived enemies, creating an “us versus them” mentality that divides societies along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines. As such, they use democracy to garner the majority against the minority, stereotype political opponents, and almost deify their leadership as the only no-alternative solution (Loftus and Gort 2023; Müller 2016). The ideology of social polarization undermines social cohesion and weakens the fabric of democracy in institutions designed to protect minority rights and ensure peaceful coexistence. Moreover, the polarizing effects of populism can hinder cooperation and consensus-building, making it difficult to address complex challenges that require collective action and collaboration across diverse interests and perspectives. Ultimately, unchecked polarization fueled by political populism can erode the foundations of democratic governance and undermine the stability and prosperity of societies. Riedel (2017, p. 289) asserts that: “Populists claim that the majority is—by democratic logic—“right” and must be respected.” Such idealization and romanticizing lead to political claims that the only source of moral truth is “the people”. This idealization considers majoritarian elections as a license for totalitarianism that has minimum regard for institutions of governance and the rule of law.

2. Assessment of Political Ethics and Implications for Authoritarian Populism

Politics operates through potentially risky and even morally ambiguous methods. It is a realm of strategy and risk, characterized by unpredictability and occasional irrational behavior. The frequent disparity between methods, goals, and results, alongside ethical considerations, underscores this unpredictability. Hence, political leaders must recognize this dynamic and strive for success while ensuring ethical alignment with their actions’ means, ends, and moral justifications.

But why should ethics be important in politics if what matters is the skill for calculated political moves to succeed by all means? First, it is essential to understand what ethics entails. Ethics can be defined as examining moral principles to determine whether actions are deemed good or bad, right or wrong, virtuous or vicious (Morrell and Hartley 2006). This ethical framework serves as the foundation for evaluating both our actions and those of others. In the realm of politics, the importance of ethics becomes particularly evident. Politicians are often regarded as leaders with significant responsibilities. Ciulla (1995) pointed out that we inhabit a world where leaders, including some of the most revered figures in history, frequently disappoint the masses morally. With the spread of populist authoritarianism, it is vital to explore the extent of the application of ethics in politics.

Max Weber highlighted that politics, by its intrinsic nature, defies simple classification as either an ethical domain or an exact science (Gane 1997). It requires the implementation
of daring strategies and necessitates decision-making while embracing uncertainty. It represents an unpredictable domain of human behavior, characterized by an enduring irrationality. The divergence between political strategy (such as populism), intended aims, and their ethical rationale highlights this reality. Political leaders are tasked with confronting this truth and endeavoring to strike a nuanced equilibrium between political triumph and ethical congruence regarding strategies, goals, intentions, and outcomes. Weber argued that this pragmatic yet ambitious form of political leadership can only be realized through the reconciliation of two opposing political ethics: the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction. There is a constant tension between political accountability (responsibility) and populism, which relies on individual convictions to manipulate the political space for political gains.

Weber (1970, p. 121) asserted the limitation of ethics as guidance for human action given that, according to him, no ethical framework can avoid the reality that, in many cases, achieving “good” outcomes may require the willingness to employ morally questionable or even risky methods that may potentially lead to harmful consequences. However, Weber’s view seems to bracket ethics as a framework for judging good and bad actions. Just because a moral act is subjected to two forces of good and bad does not mean one cannot carry out a decisive moral judgment of a human action.

Dobel (1998) explored Niccolò Machiavelli’s perspective, contending that individuals consistently adhering to ethical principles in their actions and decision-making may encounter challenges in a world where not everyone upholds similar standards. Consequently, Machiavelli suggested that a ruler may need to set aside virtuous conduct to maintain authority occasionally. This pragmatic outlook posits that leaders, confronted with significant responsibilities, formidable institutions, and determined adversaries, may find it impractical to prioritize ethics consistently. Hence, populist authoritarian leaders opt for short-term gains from their strategies while disregarding moral principles that would otherwise hold them accountable for their actions. They would thus apply the ALD theory to capture all instruments of power and subject the citizens to their political agendas.

Holdo (2022) suggested that ethicists contend that authentic communication requires genuine dedication, which inherently clashes with self-serving rationality. Yet, within political leadership, obligations to constituents may impact leaders’ behavior, although factors like the absence of reciprocity or navigating hostility and threats can also influence their decisions. The common assumption is that if leaders uphold honesty, justice, and dedication to the truth, nations will be governed by these principles, fostering fairness and preserving democratic ideals. However, this assumption fails to acknowledge the fundamental distinction between interpersonal dynamics and the governance of complex societies.

3. Catholic Political Ethics and Populist Authoritarianism

Catholic political ethics presents a robust framework for addressing the challenges posed by political populism. The ALD theory above demonstrated how authoritarian populists capture different arms of government and the citizenry. In fact, populism is characterized by its simplistic solutions and divisive rhetoric, which often undermine democratic norms and exacerbate social tensions. In contrast, Catholic political ethics offers principles rooted in the church’s teachings, which can counter populism’s adverse effects. In his encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, Pope John Paul II warned against the dangers of totalitarian regimes that disregard human rights and promote a false notion of the common good (Pope John Paul II 1987, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 39). The manipulation of ethical principles of the common good to fit into the populist agenda not only undermines democracy but equally subjects the population to manipulation and polarization. While populist authoritarians often begin by giving the impression that they prioritize the interests of the majority population, they often end up serving the interests of the political elites, the business sector, and multinationals. In contrast, Catholic social teaching calls for a just and equitable society that promotes the flourishing of all its members, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized.
Catholic political ethics underscores the inherent dignity of every human person, irrespective of their background or identity. This commitment to human dignity provides a moral imperative to defend the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups, countering the tendency of populist movements to scapegoat specific individuals, groups, races, ethnic groups, or sectors within society (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 213). Pope Francis further asserted that politicians ought to take an interest in the plight of the people and be “genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor”, making sure that “all citizens have dignified work, education, and healthcare” (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 205). The foundation of political ethics as human dignity is fundamental to understanding. Lon (2023) suggested that the church has a duty to defend the human rights of citizens and offer ethical guidance on political conduct without necessarily claiming to provide solutions to practical politics. Keenan (2023, p. 119) observed that populism is sustained by different agents, including citizens and their leaders, the wealthy behind the financing of the populists, opportunistic institutions that fund populists, and the elite. Populism is thus institutionalized and wall-fenced to maintain the status quo.

Additionally, the principle of subsidiarity, which calls for decision-making to occur at the most local and decentralized level possible, can serve as a bulwark against the centralization of power, in line with the ALD and consideration for the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching. The principle of subsidiarity decentralizes power and recognizes the role of every citizen in the organization of society.

In addition to the principle of subsidiarity, there is the principle of solidarity, which emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual responsibility among all members of society. Solidarity calls for awareness of the needs of others who are different from us and the interconnectedness of the human race. Contrary to populist authoritarianism, which dichotomizes and polarizes society, solidarity reiterates the value of recognizing each other’s humanity. In Fratelli Tuti (no. 73–74), Pope Francis spoke strongly against local and global indifference to the needs of others.

In pursuit of the common good, Catholic political ethics advocate for policies and practices that benefit the entire community rather than privileging the interests of a particular group or constituency. This emphasis on the common good challenges the narrow self-interest often propagated by populist leaders, encouraging a more inclusive and equitable approach to governance (Pope Benedict XVI 2009, Caritas in Veritate, 7). Moreover, Catholic political ethics underscores the importance of dialogue, reconciliation, and forgiveness in addressing the social-political divisions often propagated by populist authoritarian regimes (Pope Francis 2020, Fratelli Tutti, 224). Hence, to reinforce and achieve the principles of human dignity, common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity, this article suggests two ethical values: social recognition and social cohesion.

4. Social Recognition and Social Cohesion: Counter Values to Populist Authoritarianism

To counter the divisive and short-term gains of populist authoritarianism, it is vital to articulate social values from Catholic political ethics that may provide a framework for ethical evaluation. Two principles provide such a framework: social recognition of every person’s dignity and social cohesion as a strategy for prioritizing social harmony, tolerance, reconciliation, and peace sustainability. These frameworks stipulate the basis for social justice enshrined in the church’s prophetic role.

4.1. Social Recognition

Populist authoritarianism, as stated above, thrives in the marginalization of certain sectors of society by polarizing society and disregarding the contributions of opponents to social welfare. The lack of recognition of the ‘other’ poses a potential situation for conflict. Hence, social recognition can serve as a potent counterforce to the rise of populism and authoritarianism, offering a pathway to strengthen democracy, foster inclusion, and promote social cohesion (McNay 2008). In the face of populist appeals that often exploit social
divisions and grievances, social recognition emphasizes acknowledging and validating diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives (Fraser 2000). By affirming the worth and dignity of all individuals and communities, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status, social recognition challenges the divisive narratives and exclusionary politics often associated with populism and authoritarianism.

Social recognition entails recognizing everyone’s humanity and the inherent dignity enshrined in the fact that all are created in the image and likeness of God. It affirms that every person has a right to equal treatment, respect, and dignity. However, this recognition ought to be protected in a legal structure, protecting the rights of every citizen (McNay 2008, p. 273). This gives individuals and groups the right to speak out for their rights and be recognized. Such advocacy for the right to individual or group recognition serves as a powerful antidote to the dehumanization and marginalization often perpetuated by populist leaders who seek to scapegoat specific groups and sow discord for political gain.

Social recognition equally implies walking in the shoes of the ‘other’, living an empathetic connection with those who think differently or hold different political opinions and positions, are marginalized by political systems, or are fighting for the rights of minorities. In other words, political differences should not be used to take away empathy and solidarity among citizens. Populist authoritarian leaders apply the ALD theory by polarizing the citizens and exploiting inherent differentiation between them. Hence, in the spirit of solidarity and common good, all human beings should stand in solidarity with those marginalized, oppressed, or suffering (Pope John Paul II 1987, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 38). This solidarity extends beyond mere sympathy or charity; it involves active engagement in efforts to address the root causes of social injustice and inequality. By fostering empathy, understanding, and solidarity across diverse communities, social recognition builds bridges of trust and cooperation, countering the divisive rhetoric and fearmongering tactics employed by authoritarian populists (Honneth 1995).

Social justice is another critical component of social recognition. Rooted in the Gospel message of love and compassion, social justice entails pursuing a society where all individuals can flourish and fulfill their God-given potential. This requires recognizing and rectifying social structures and systems perpetuating inequality, discrimination, and oppression. Central to Catholic social teaching is the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable (Pope John Paul II 1987, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 42). This principle underscores the importance of prioritizing the needs and rights of those who are marginalized or oppressed in social, economic, and political decision-making processes. Social justice demands concerted efforts to alleviate poverty, address inequality, and empower those who are most disadvantaged. It involves advocating for policies and practices that promote more significant equity, inclusion, and opportunity for all members of society (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 203).

4.2. Promoting Social Cohesion

The church’s role in promoting social cohesion against political divisions is significant and multifaceted, drawing from its rich theological and moral traditions. The Catholic church, in particular, has been instrumental in fostering unity and reconciliation across diverse communities. As already stated above, the church promotes social cohesion by emphasizing the dignity and equality of all human beings. Protecting human dignity is affirmed in Catholic social teaching as a fundamental principle in all societal interventions. Whenever any form of political governance violates human dignity, the church has a moral obligation to speak up. The church has spoken up against human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, Kenya, El Salvador, Burkina Faso, and the United States, among others. Pope Francis asserted in his apostolic exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium” that the church is called to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which affirms the dignity of every person: “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 187). This emphasis on
the dignity of the poor and marginalized is a powerful counterposition to many societies’ divisions and inequalities. This confirms the long tradition of the church in defending human dignity.

Moreover, the church is a bridge builder between different ethnic, racial, political, and social groups through various initiatives. The church has always been a mediator of human divisions, calling for respect for social identities while acknowledging complementarity in diversity (Pope Benedict XVI 2011, Africae Munus, 39). Pope Francis emphasized the importance of dialogue and encounters in overcoming divisions when he stated, “We are called to be instruments of reconciliation, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to sow seeds of reconciliation” (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 239). The church brings together people from diverse backgrounds to foster understanding and cooperation through interfaith dialogue, ecumenical efforts, and community outreach programs, breaking the boundaries perpetuating polarization.

Catholic social teaching emphasizes public participation in promoting and safeguarding the common good. Politics is seen as a common good that should interest every person of goodwill. Pope Francis reaffirmed that good Catholics should “immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader can govern” (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 183). This means that every citizen should actively advocate for political accountability on the part of those who govern. For example, by advocating for transparent governance, respect for the rule of law, and protecting human rights, the church builds a more just and equitable society founded on the ethical value of social cohesion and human prosperity.

Paying attention to marginalized persons by providing essential services like education, health, and economic empowerment contributes immensely to a sense of national belonging and motivation to contribute to the welfare of society. The church’s extensive social services network is crucial in promoting social cohesion. Pope Francis underscored the importance of reaching out to the marginalized and excluded, stating, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (Pope Francis 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, 49). Through its schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable institutions, the church provides essential support to those in need, strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility for the well-being of all (Pope Benedict XVI 2005, Deus Caritas Est, 25).

5. Conclusions

Catholic political ethics provides an essential framework for challenging and resisting populist authoritarianism, which tends to polarize society and diminish the quality of life. Rooted in principles of human dignity, justice, and the common good, Catholic political ethics offers a compelling alternative to the divisive rhetoric and oppressive tactics employed by authoritarian populists under the alternative leadership deficiency (ALD) theory. By affirming the inherent worth of every individual, promoting solidarity and social cohesion, and advocating for justice and peace, Catholic political ethics challenges populist authoritarian leaders to refrain from simplifying complex governance matters and focus on improving the quality of life for the majority of the population. Through its prophetic witness and commitment to upholding all people’s dignity and rights, the church inspires and empowers individuals and communities to resist injustice, promote democracy, and build a more just and humane society. This calls for a transformative power of love, justice, and compassion in the face of populist authoritarianism and injustice through the use of nonviolent mechanisms of resistance.

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