

## Article

# Vox populi (Dei), vox Dei: Pope Francis' Theology of the People of God, the Priesthood of All Believers and Democracy

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**Abstract:** The Holy See is an absolute monarchy, both as a political and as a spiritual entity. The Second Vatican Council indicated, retrieving biblical terms and metaphors, a new way of giving value to the whole people of God, the laity (*laos theou*), constituted by baptism. Rather than a *societas perfecta* in a pyramidal system, the intention was to clericalise and in this sense democratise the church and its decision-making, not least seeking to secure its witness in an ever more secular world. Even if a sacramental and ontological difference is maintained, this indicates clergy are no longer a first class of believers against which the laity would be a second class; rather, they are rooted and stand with and within the whole people of God with their specific vocation and ordination. The notion of the royal and universal priesthood of believers, taken from 1 Peter 2:9 and emphasised by Luther and other reformers as they distributed power between ordained and not ordained leaders, was visible in the Second Vatican Council and finds new enactment in the synodality process which culminated in the Ordinary Synod in Rome, in October 2024. Based on his own theology of the people of God, developed during the dictatorship and economic oppression in Argentina, with strong cultural and religious connotations, Pope Francis seeks to further major involvement of the laity and especially of women in the church's administration and transformation processes. Not surprisingly, this process has been receiving criticism both from those who find it is not going far enough and from those who believe the process has already gone far too far. Based on bibliographical and documental research, the intention of this article is to describe and analyse the notion of the people of God as proposed by Pope Francis and its forms of concretisation including its deficiencies, as well as, in dialogue with ongoing debates on populism, highlight the precariousness of any "people" as a concept and as a reality. A dynamic notion of "people" and a theological accountability of the people and the clergy towards each other, towards God and towards the world can do justice to both the ambiguities and the irreplaceability of the people as citizens of the church as well as the world.

**Keywords:** priesthood of all believers; Pope Francis; synodality; Christian ethics; democracy



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## 1. Introduction

In recent Catholic theology, especially since the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, superscripted *de populo Dei*, which is placed programmatically before the chapter on the hierarchical structure of the church, and again very clearly with Pope Francis, the people of God has become a central concept in Catholic ecclesiology (LG 9–17; Bergner 2017). While this might be, in fact, the "oldest definition of the Church" (Küng 1967, p. 12) within a wide variety throughout history, its renewed use indicates a clear change of perspective: not as *societas perfecta*, not as a pyramid from the hierarchy of the consecrated order down to the laity, but as the people of God on the way, in continuity with the chosen people of God of the Old Testament, from among whom some people are consecrated as spiritual leaders. This biblical view, as a nearly inevitable consequence, has to call into question the position of the pope as absolute monarch, overcoming what Canon Law formulates and the understanding that has developed in that direction since the 4th

century (Boff 2014, 10, 14–16), stating that “by virtue of his office he [i.e., the pope] possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely” (CIC 1983, can. 331). There have indeed been significant changes in that Pope Francis follows a pastoral rather than doctrinal or legal approach, but he has, so far, instituted only minor doctrinal and legal changes—using the very monarchical power that is to be overcome. Thus, non-sacramental ministries are no longer restricted to men (*virii laici* gave way to *laici* in CIC can. 230 §1) and the lay ministry of Catechist was created by Francis (AM), being that the vast majority of catechists are women. It is unclear if and when major changes—like the introduction of women deacons, the end of compulsory celibacy for priests, a more collaborative leadership between clergy and laity and a reformulation of the Pope’s power and role—will occur. Already now, the wind against Pope Francis’ attitude and transformations is stiff.

Although there is, in Brazil and in Latin America, a critical ecclesiological reflection on the hierarchy, a broad inclusion of the people and an evident public presence of the church, historically in particular through the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs; cf. von Sinner 2012), expectations for a more radical structural change in the Catholic church seem quite modest on our continent if compared to, for example, Germany. There, the *Synodaler Weg* (“synodal journey”), faced with the extreme erosion of the Catholic church in the perception of both the faithful and wider society as a result of the revelations of countless cases of sexual abuse, saw a huge commitment from the bishops and clergy, together with the laity, to find ways of effectively sharing power in the church. In Rome, however, this unilateral advance is not well regarded and has met with clear restrictions from the pope himself, which has frustrated expectations and concretely prevented the creation of a “synodal council” (*synodaler Rat*) with decision-making rights (cf. Vignon 2024).

No similar movement is visible in Brazil or Latin America. With regard to democratic leadership—or the lack of it—at the beginning of the 1980s, Leonardo Boff had already warned about what he saw as the “pathologies” of Catholicism and promoted an “ecclesio-genesis” from below (Boff 1985, 1986, 2014; cf. Nordstokke 1996). He promoted a more egalitarian, participatory and communitarian church inspired and formed by the divine Trinity (Boff 1988; cf. von Sinner 2003). As is well known, Boff was punished with a year of silence for his questioning, and his ecumenical, inclusive understanding of the *subsistit in* of LG 8 was explicitly rejected in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s declaration *Dominus Iesus* of 2000 (DI note 56). For his part, Boff continues to defend the interpretation that, according to the intention of the Council Fathers with the formulation *subsistit in (ecclesiam catholicam)* instead of the exclusive and identitarian *est*, they mean that “the Church of Christ can also subsist in other Churches” (Boff 2015, p. 919).<sup>1</sup> He has been honing high expectations for Francis of Rome to follow Francis of Assisi in “a new springtime for the church”, restoring Christ’s church as was the earlier Francis’ mission (Boff 2014, pp. 35–8).

On the Protestant side, none of this seems to be a problem. After all, the priesthood of all believers or universal priesthood is the basis of Luther’s understanding of community and church, founded on 1 Peter 2:9, which in turn reflects Exodus 19:6. In this view, the ordained ministry is not a sacrament, but a specific function and mandate of those called and trained for it, who exercise the office of proclaiming the Word in a special and public way. Or so the doctrine affirms. Matter-of-factly, however, we do find a tendency towards clericalism in Protestant churches. Considering the German context, the originally Catholic theologian Fulbert Steffensky<sup>2</sup> said: “The most clerical services I know are the Reformed ones,” because there are no fixed rules and everything rests on the shoulders—and the decision-making power—of the respective minister. The pastor is speaking “from beginning to end” and is “master of the sacred event” (Steffensky 2012, p. 42; cf. Plüss 2017, p. 145). The Swiss Reformed pastor—my own origin—has, so to speak, to recreate heaven and earth every Sunday, a duty he performs with more or less dedication and joy. One could attribute sacramental quality to this, although Protestant theology would reject it. In any

case, it offers a lot of freedom and room for creativity, which is certainly positive, but it can also be quite onerous.

With these contexts in mind, I add the element of insisting on “the people” in a programmatic way of looking at populism (Laclau 2005; cf. von Sinner and Gabatz 2021), a precarious category which indicates that “a people” is always under construction, something that resonates with the fragility and vulnerability of existence as such and of the Christian people, in particular, in the face of sin, failure, guilt and shame (cf. von Sinner 2022).

I will turn first to the theology of the People of God in the Catholic Church and Pope Francis in particular, followed by the universal priesthood in its theory and reality in Protestant churches, to finally comment on “people”, democracy, and citizenship on earth and in heaven.

## 2. The People of God in the Understanding of Pope Francis

As stated above, the concept of the people of God was central to the Second Vatican Council’s constitution on the church. It emerges again with emphasis in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), of 2013. In the meantime, the authority of the See of Peter and the bishops under him and in communion with him had been strengthened by Pope John Paul II, which counteracted democratisation initiatives such as existed, already back then, in Germany. Munich dogmatics professor Peter Neuner had published a book on *Der Laie und das Gottesvolk* (“The Laity and the People of God”) in 1988. Twenty-seven years later, he published a new, extensively revised version of that book, now under the title *Abschied von der Ständekirche. Plädoyer für eine Theologie des Gottesvolkes* (“Farewell to the Church of Estates: A Call for a Theology of the People of God”—Neuner 2015). Neuner emphasises the fundamental and prioritarian character of the people of God, which predates the distinction between ministers (ordained or not) and non-ministers, and opposes a church organised on the basis of clerical and lay estates. Already in the introduction, Neuner refers to an innovation of Pope Francis on the occasion of the World Synod of Bishops on the Family (2014), when, in the preparatory phase, surveys were carried out of the opinion of the faithful in order to listen to them (cf. also Zulehner 2021). At the same time, Neuner recalls that the idea of the whole people of God—even if led by ordained ministers—being in charge of evangelisation dates back to 1922, defended by Pope Pius XI. in his inaugural encyclical *Ubi arcano Dei Consilio* (UA) which is considered to be the inaugural act of the Catholic Action. It refers to the laity as those who “participate in the apostolate, both individual and social” as, in the words of 1 Peter 2:9, “a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (UA 58). At the time, what was at stake was reconstruction after the destruction of the First World War and the perceived decadence of religion and morality, which had to be countered by the mobilisation of the laity. Catholic Action was an initiative for this mobilisation under the clear and undisputed leadership of ordained ministers in their distinction from the laity. More recent forms such as Belgian Catholic Action under Cardinal Cardijn, with its See–Judge–Act method, promoted a more participatory mobilisation and influenced Latin American Liberation Theology.

At the same time as Liberation Theology, and explicitly as one of its varieties (Cuda 2019), a Theology of the People (*Teología del Pueblo*) developed in Argentina, to which Pope Francis is heir. The 1974 Synod of Bishops echoed it, especially through Bishop (later Cardinal) Eduardo Pironio (1920–1998), Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) in 1975, followed by the Third General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Puebla, in 1979, and the Fifth Assembly in Aparecida, in 2007. “People”, already present in the Second General CELAM Assembly in Medellín, in 1968, became more central and more focused on the poor people—in Puebla, of a total of 368 occurrences of “people”, nearly all are related to poverty and liberation, or even to revolution (Salinas 2020, p. 46). According to Argentinian Jesuit Scannone (2016, 2021), who is himself one of the references of such TdP, the term emerged from two priests and professors at the Argentine Catholic University (UCA), Lucio Gera (1924–2012) and Rafael Tello (1917–2002).

Politically close to Peronism, they sought an autochthonous source for their theology that did not simply repeat what they saw as Western liberalism or exaggerated Marxism. This source would be the culture and religiosity of the people, seeking the church's engagement among the peoples (i.e., nations) as subjects of their history and culture. While a more cultural and national than social notion of "people" was used<sup>3</sup>, the fact that the vast majority of the people were poor brought TdP close to Liberation Theology. Obviously, the idea of the nation as a homogenous people never corresponded to reality. But the "wisdom" of the people, their genuine practice, belief, and knowledge, was valued, as it helped in the inculturation of the faith. The piety of the people became a *locus theologicus*, a place where theological truth could be found, as EG 126 states. Pope Francis' development of a TdP, on the other hand, recognises an irreversible pluralism, for which he uses the metaphor of a polyhedron (EG 236). The question of the democratisation of the church—very prominent in Leonardo Boff and also in central Europe—seems less central to this view of a TdP than the importance given to popular piety and wisdom, imbricated as it is by Catholic culture and religion, especially in the case of Argentina. The pope does, however, criticise what he calls "narcissistic and authoritarian elitism" (EG 94) as well as clericalism (EG 102), namely inasmuch as it hinders evangelism and the formation and position of the laity, explicitly including women. (Male) clerical power should not be domination, but service and administering of the sacraments (EG 104), and decision-making should be participatory. However, Francis does not discuss here the use and abuse of power in the church, nor mention democracy (or monarchy) in it beyond such hints.

The decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, of 1965, already emphasised that the "laity, sharing in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly office, share the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world" (AA 2). What is striking here is the emphasis on the *triplex munus Christi*, a Christological understanding prominent in Protestantism, where it had been developed namely by Calvin and Bullinger. Participation in this *munus* is based on baptism, strengthened by the seal of the Holy Spirit, which the text describes as consecration: "they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4–10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world." (AA 3).

For Pope Francis, the Church is essentially a Church "in exit", that is, a missionary Church, present in the world. In EG 135–59 there is a very long section on the homily and its preparation, where the Pope emphasises that "the preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear" (EG 154). Citing EN 63, the Pope emphasises that it is about speaking "to actual people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask" (EG 154, emphasis mine). The "people" here are all the faithful in *their concrete context of life*, as evidenced in the congregational community.

"People" also appears in the sense of the *poor* which have a special place in God's people. Indeed, the Pope wants "a Church which is poor and for the poor" (EG 198). Concrete situations that arise again and again on an emergency basis should be characterised by an attitude of understanding rather than rigour, even though doctrine cannot be changed for the sake of it: "Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?" he says, citing abortion as a result of violence or in a context of extreme poverty (EG 214). "People", often in the plural "peoples", also refer to the *population* or to *humanity as a whole*, when the Pope states that "small yet strong in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples." (EG 216).

Finally, very much in line with the TdP, people can designate a *specific nation*, within which its people are configured as "committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be" (EG 220). A "people", therefore, is something that is not simply given, but is constantly being built, and is qualified by citizenship and conviviality (*convivência*) beyond simple coexistence: "Yet *becoming a people* demands something more

[sc. beyond exercising citizenship in the political sense]. It is an ongoing process” that aims at “the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter” (ibid., emphasis mine).

The Pope develops this idea of “building a people in peace, justice and fraternity” based on four principles “related to constant tensions present in every social reality” (EG 221) and which he has been developing, as Scannone says, since 1974. Francis explains these principles in EG 221–37: (1) *Time is superior to space*, in reference to the tension between fullness and limit, a “greater, brighter horizon”, that opens up to an “utopian future”. It is, according to the Pope, about “initiating processes rather than possessing spaces” (EG 223), in a necessary long-term vision. (2) *Unity prevails over conflict*, without denying, but rather transforming it, developing a “communion amid disagreement” (EG 228). Solidarity must prevail in a unity on a higher plane. The basis of unity is the Holy Spirit who “can harmonize every diversity” (EG 230). As a concrete example of the affirmation of unity in the midst of (conflictive) diversity, he cites the Episcopal Conference of the Democratic Republic of Congo. (3) According to the Pope, *reality is more important than the idea*, because while the latter is elaborated, the former simply is. Ideas as conceptual elaborations would be at the service of understanding and affecting reality. If the second principle is pneumatological, the third is Christological and incarnational. Finally, (4), the *whole is greater than the part*, showing a tension between the global and the local. The whole is more than the part, but neither is it equal to the sum of the parts. This is where Francis introduces the polyhedron as a model, “which reflects the confluence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness” (EG 236), different from the sphere, in which “every point [sc. on the surface] is equidistant from the centre.” Here, he speaks of the “convergence of peoples”, of the “sum total of people within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone” (ibid.). Here, as elsewhere in the text, one can detect a distinction, but also a porosity between the “faithful people” within their “mysticism” (EG 237) and the people of humanity, the peoples of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

There is undoubtedly a prominent place in Pope Francis’ theology for the people of God, taking seriously what the faithful think, believe and practise, the “simple” people, especially the poor, walking among them as he did when he was a priest and bishop in Argentina. However, the predominantly cultural bias comes from the experience of a people embedded in a Catholic, even if syncretistic matrix, as is the case in Argentina, and is not easily adaptable to more diverse contexts, even considering Brazil, which has changed in around 40 years from a clearly Catholic country to one that is increasingly religiously diverse, with an exponential growth in *evangélico* churches. Furthermore, the long-standing demand for greater democratisation of the church, present more in Brazil than in Argentina historically, and clearly in central Europe, seems to be treated with great caution. It is, of course, noteworthy that the pope, as sovereign in the church and among the states—as absolute monarch of the Vatican City State—endeavours to mitigate the concentration of power that comes with the office. Ironically, Francis receives a lot of “support” in this deconstruction from those who do not recognise him as pope, even though they are the same people who have always advocated recognising the absolute sovereignty of the pope as an office.

### 3. The Universal Priesthood of Believers from a Protestant, Namely Lutheran Perspective

On the Protestant side, decision-making from the outset was—and had to be, given the initial lack of ordained ministers—participatory at community level and between communities, in an emerging congregational or synodal–presbyteral system. In this system, even though there is leadership from the ordained minister in spiritual aspects and, depending on their degree of employment and dedication, also effective in leading the life of the community, the presbytery (of the “elders” = i.e., a local or regional council) is made up of lay people who also exercise their leadership and are elected by the community as a whole. They even decide on the election of their minister, something that is re-evaluated periodically, which can also result in a decision to discontinue a particular minister. Both lay

leaders and those exercising an ordained ministry must be accountable to God, of course, but also to the members of the community and to the civil authorities within the legal precepts laid down. This does not mean that there is not often a concentration of power and initiative in the hands of the ordained minister. At the time of the Reformation, in winning independence from the pope and in view of the inexistence of bishops that became Protestant, princes or city councils assumed (administrative) episcopacy and acquired power in and over the church in central Europe. While Luther distinguished between two regiments, he did not think of a separation of secular and spiritual power, given both were under God and both were, albeit with different means and responsibilities, to fulfil God's purposes.

In any case, there is some theological pride among Protestants in the principle and concept of the priesthood of the faithful or universal priesthood. For Luther, it was central to his understanding of faith and church, even if it did not result in a congregationalist church constitution—which is more common on the basis of a Reformed, Calvinist theology (cf. Sallmann 2018, p. 56). Through baptism, for Luther “we are all consecrated priests”, and there is no fundamental difference, except that of office, between priests and princes, religious and secular. All are “of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes”, even if not everyone has the same function to fulfil (LW 44, 129). From this perspective, the only *character indelebilis* of the people of God is baptism. Interestingly, not much is said about the “people of God” among Protestants, except in connection with the people of Israel in the Old Testament; however, with restrictions in applying that to the Christian church, namely after the atrocities of the holocaust that laid bare the long-standing antisemitism present in Christianity, including Protestant theology.<sup>5</sup> Protestant ecclesiology rather focuses on the relationship between the ordained ministry and membership in the community—analogue to one of the main strands in recent Catholic ecclesiology—or else on the *Volkskirche*, the “national church”—not in the sense of a State or established church, however—to which one belongs by tradition rather than conscious adherence, in a term coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher (cf. Plüss et al. 2016; Beckmeier and Mulia 2021). Of course, the history of nationalist and exclusivist abuse of the term “people” (*Volk*) by German nationalism and especially Nazism has contaminated the term in the European context. However, in the current Schleiermacher-Renaissance in German-speaking theology and the quest to maintain the current shape of the Protestant church in that context as public law and influential in society, the concept resurfaces with the necessary caution.

An exception to the rule is the book written from an ecumenical perspective by Lutheran theologian, professor now emeritus at the University of Marburg, Hans-Martin Barth, *Einander Priester sein* (“being priests to one another”), unique even nearly 35 years after its publication (Barth 1990). Amongst other things, it notes that the most comprehensive study on the general priesthood in Luther had been written by a Catholic theologian (Bravo 1963)<sup>6</sup>! Beyond probing into Luther's universal priesthood of believers, Spener, Wichern, orthodox comprehensions and the Second Vatican Council, Barth also registers and discusses the impulses that came from (Catholic) Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America. He considered the latter of special importance as they were an articulation of the laity itself. Barth underlines that Luther did not only intend to combat an exacerbated clericalism, but developed a new vision of the church, based on the priesthood of Christians for each other that creates community. Although the praxis stayed, to say the least, ambiguous, the early Luther was very clear that *cum a laico nihil differat, nisi ministerio* (quoted in Barth 1990, p. 35, note 17)—there is no difference between clergy and laity, except for their office—thus refuting the *Decretum Gratiani* which had precisely introduced such distinction and, indeed, separation. For Luther, the *sacerdotium*, the priesthood, extends to all (LW, 40, 19—“Concerning the Ministry”, 1523), while the *ministerium*, the service as minister, is a specific task to which only some are called and installed. It is important to remember that the ordained ministry, as such also for Luther and other Reformers, was of divine, not human institution (e.g., LW 40, 11). The foundation of the universal priesthood is soteriological, not in the first place ecclesiological. To be a priest as a baptised Christian

implies, in Luther's view, hearing confession, praying, doctrinal discernment and to be Christ for one another (Barth 1990, pp. 39–46, cf. LW 40, 21–34; cf. on the whole Goertz 1997). Because of such spiritual responsibility of every Christian, exercising in this way her(his) citizenship in heaven, (s)he also acts responsibly in earthly citizenship, where her(his) vocation and profession (*Beruf* and *Berufung*) lies. This can be seen as laying the basis (not yet being the enactment!) for equal human rights and democracy. If populism today is usually connected with combating imagined or real elites, then here we have an affirmation of “the people” against spiritual elites, who at the time also had ample earthly powers. Some have argued there is not only a universal priesthood, but also a universal kingship of all believers as a foundation for the sovereignty initially of the princes, but eventually of the people (von Oppen 1968).

In more recent years, the principle of the universal priesthood of all believers has been elaborated less in systematic and more from the perspective of practical theology; for example, emphasising the theological productivity of the faithful as “lived theology”, based on the “people's world of experience and reality of life” which becomes theology to the extent that it “finds reflective expression and public resonance” (Müller 2018, p. 24). According to Protestant practical theologian Sabrina Müller, the primary task of the ordained ministry is to promote the realisation of the general ecclesial mandate of “communication of the Gospel”, through the “capacitation of universal priests and priestesses in their daily Gospel ministry” (Müller 2018, p. 39). The central issue here is *empowerment*, which I understand as the capacity and authorisation that recognises maturity and adulthood in the faith. This idea, *avant la lettre*, can already be found in pietism, when Johanna Eleonora Peterson claimed the principle of the universal priesthood explicitly for herself, so that she could legitimise herself in relation to potential critics to a woman who published (see Sallmann 2018, p. 60). In 1881, the Synod of the Reformed Church in Bern, Switzerland, promulgated not just a traditional regulation for preachers, but an “Order of the Congregation and Preachers”, with explicit mention of the universal priesthood, because, in the words of church historian Martin Sallmann, “the members participated in the development of Christian faith and life in discipleship and work for the Kingdom of God” (Sallmann 2018, p. 63).

#### 4. People, Democracy, and Citizenship on Earth and in Heaven

It has become clear that both the Catholic—since the Second Vatican Council, reinforced by EG—and the Lutheran church have the universal priesthood as a basis for the emergence and construction of the people of God. Although this latter concept is used nearly exclusively in the Catholic environment, it is clear that it is a concept taken from the Bible, placing the Christian people in continuity with the Jewish people—with the danger, it is true, of a substitutionary theology, which must be avoided, since God's promises to the Jewish people remain intact—albeit with a more universal and supra-national connotation (Caliman 2015). In this sense, the use of people of God refers in the first place to salvation history and not to organisational matters, but it also extends to those inside and outside the church.

On the secular side, it is precisely “people” as a national and ethnic category, common in right-wing populisms—in left-wing populisms, a socio-economic understanding of “people” prevails—has become highly ambivalent. However, a shallow and superficial critique of populism can strengthen an elitist contempt for the (real) people, especially the poor and those with less formal education, which contradicts the inclusivity of the church in Jesus' intention. Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, hailing from the same context as Pope Francis' TdP (Cuda 2019; Salinas 2020), can be helpful in seeing “people” both in a secular sense and as God's people as precarious categories and, even more so, precarious realities (see further von Sinner and Gabatz 2021). A Christian, namely a Lutheran, should not be surprised at that, given their perception of a constant presence of not only individual, but structural sin. The journey of a Christian, a citizen of heaven through baptism, salvation

from the Cross and the promise of God's final redemption, makes them a committed, but also self-conscious citizen of this world.

Both the Catholic and Protestant churches today are clearly favourable to democracy in a secular, plural, constitutional state. However, what about democracy in the church? The Catholic church, while valuing ever more the contribution of the laity to its mission, maintains a not only functional, but ontological distinction between clergy and laity. This does not mean, however, that the sharing of responsibilities, administration and planning and, thus, power—except sacramental power—remains unthinkable. The actions of Pope Francis, the way to greater synodality, even with reservations towards the German process, show that there is some movement also on the level of the world church, and can be in local churches and parishes. On the other hand, Protestant churches have, even in Luther's times, often not lived up to their own claim to the equality of believers in the church. Matter-of-factly, as indicated, they are very much centred on the pastor. This should make them humble in criticizing other traditions, while it also shows all is not yet explored in terms of the universal priesthood. A merely functional view of the ordained ministry might, after all, not be enough to account for both a theological and sociological understanding. And no church of a people of God under constant construction will achieve this without a constant and thorough nurturing and formation of its members, not only, but also in theology and a critical perception of the world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Steffensky was a Benedictine friar for 13 years. In 1969, he left the order and converted to the evangelical Lutheran confession, marrying the also Lutheran theologian Dorothee Sölle (d. 2003). He was professor of Education and also Religious Education. With such trajectory, he is a critical, both external and internal observer.

<sup>3</sup> According to Salinas (2020, p. 44), episcopal documents understand the "people" as a community of faith; as the "way of life of a population" in the sociological sense; associated with the degree of development, in the economic sense, and as a synonym for a "collective subject" with capacities and rights (of citizenship). The latter meanings stand out especially since Puebla. Inspired by Gramsci, the Argentinian Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) understood that "the people" could not, for its own construction, dispense with the figure of a leader who would articulate it.

<sup>4</sup> The official English translation renders the Italian original "mistica popolare" (in quotation marks, as in Portuguese, Spanish, French, but also in German "Volksmystik") by "the genius of each people", without quotation marks. In Latin languages, "popular mysticism" is a common expression and refers to popular, i.e., common, inculturated mysticism that is already there, under (not exclusive) influence from the Gospel. In EG 124, the same expression is mentioned with a reference to the Aparecida Document (DocAp 262)—of which then Cardinal José Maria Bergoglio was the main editor—which further explains it as "faith that is incarnated in culture" which has to be "evangelized" and "purified", but already contains "evangelical richness"). In EG 124, the English correctly renders "the people's mysticism", in quotation marks as in the other languages. In my judgement, the official English translation of EG 237 is, therefore, incorrect and misleading, as "the genius of each people" seems to refer to a national, cultural character without a connection to transcendence, precisely without what in turn "mysticism" necessarily implies. It appears as a secularised expression. Pope Francis, for his part, within the logic of the TdP, thinks of an—even if



poorly—evangelised, albeit syncretistic people and their religiosity. On Pope Francis’ theological background see also Bergner (2017, pp. 481–9).

<sup>5</sup> For a Catholic compilation and interpretation of Protestant positions on the People of God between 1880 and 1942, see Keller (1970, pp. 137–86).

<sup>6</sup> This book was written at the eve of the Second Vatican Council, parting from the unquestioned conviction the Catholic Church is holding the “full treasure of truth” (Bravo 1963, xviii), but with a thorough reading of Luther’s works, tracing his understanding of the universal priesthood back to a sermon proffered in 1512.

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