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Catholic Liberalism: An Anti-Populist Proposal

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Abstract- This paper explores the axiological convergence between classical liberalism and Catholic Social Thought (CST). The paper argues that CST and classical liberals should build on their complementary values to strengthen public support for liberal democracy and a free-market economy among Catholic voters and in society at large. Although populist regimes, in particular far-right conservative nationalists, portray liberalism as an antithesis of Catholicism, this paper shows that there is a broad consensus between the two traditions. Contrary to far-right populist positions, it is possible to maintain Catholic values in a liberal market democracy without denouncing one's religious identity. The paper emphasizes the importance of re-constructing a centrist tradition of Catholic liberal thought to mitigate populist assault on political, economic, andsocial freedoms.

Introduction

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, liberalism seemed to be an uncontested winner of the Cold War (Fukuyama,1992). Liberal democracy spread in waves across Central Europe, Latin America, Asia, and parts of Africa. Structural market reforms - privatization, deregulation, liberalization – have transformed closed non-market systems into attractive emerging markets and ushered in a new phase of globalization. Migration barriers eased which has triggered a new era of mass tourism and international labor. The volume of global trade, as well as direct and indirect investment, havesoared. The world of the 1990s seemed to be the dawn of global economic, political and social convergence.

And yet, no sooner did the 21st century begin, the appeal of liberal market democracy came under question. The invasion of Iraq was a hard blow to the liberal world order. The 2007-2009 financial- cum-economic crisis dented public trust in capitalism. The importance of human rights seemed doubtful in the face of the 2015 refugee crisis, and gruesome wars in Syria and Yemen. Protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Live Matter, Yellow Vests, and Primera Linea exposed deep pockets of anger and social frustration within mature and emerging democracies alike. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has shown the weakness of mere economic globalization as an anchor of peace and stability regardless of geo-political factors.

In response to these structural problems, several populist leaders and parties have emerged over the last 20 years. Most of them - both on the right and on the left - see liberalism as the main reason for social polarization, political discontent, and economic woes. Right-wing populists tend to see liberalism as a threat to national identities, and religious conservative values. They associate it with moral decadence and foreign control of national economic interests. Left-wing populists perceive liberalism as a synonym for corruption, greed, elitism, and neo-colonialism.

Populists tend to agree about a new development model called "illiberal democracy" to replace theliberal market democracy (Zakaria,1997). In a nutshell, this new model limits the space for political, social, and economic freedoms while maintaining elements of electoral and representative democracy. Nevertheless, international rankings show a profound decline in the standards and quality of democratic institutions and the decline of social and economic freedoms under "illiberaldemocracy" (EIU, 2022).

This paper will argue that classical liberalism and Catholic Social Thought (CST) should build on their complementary values to rebuild public trust in democracy, and free-market economy among Catholics and in society at large. While populist regimes, in particular far-right conservative nationalists, often paint liberalism as the antithesis of Catholicism, this paper aims to show that both traditions have several points of convergence that allow the construction of a social contract in favor of democracy, an open society and a market economy that unites both believers and non-believers. In this sense, this research seeks to provide arguments against the conviction of right- wing conservative populists that liberalism is incompatible with Catholicism.

The first section offers a brief review of the basic principles of classical liberalism to discard stereotapes and misinterpretations. The second section outlines the main points of divergence between classical liberalism and the CST. The third section reviews the main points of convergence between the two traditions. The fourth section presents the political toolkit used by contemporary populist regimes to "correct" the failures of liberalism. The final section emphasizes the importance of re-constructing a centrist tradition of conservative-liberal thought to strengthen public trust in liberal market democracy and to mitigate populist assault on the political, economic,and social institutions of freedom.

I. Classical Liberalism: An Overview

Classical liberalism is a political philosophy that develops gradually from the 17th century onwards in the context of the religious wars between Catholic and Protestant kingdoms in Europe. Following the English

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Civil War (1642-1651), Thomas Hobbes writes Leviathan, one of the pillarsof modern political philosophy, in which he puts forward the idea of the social contract. The maturation of classical liberalism was pushed further by Anglo-Saxon thinkers such as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, and James Madison, who builds upon the natural law tradition, especially the idea of inalienable rights.

Classical liberalism is founded on the following six principles:[1]

(1) *Negative freedom*: Freedom is about being able to live a life one wants without undue interference from the state and society. Liberals reject state absolutism, that is, the unlimited scopeof the state's action which annihilates human freedom. A liberal state is like a night watchman or an umpire. It guarantees little else than public order and the rule of law which allow people to make their own choices about the way they want to live. Having provided basic public goods, a liberal state takes a step back to make room for individual freedoms and human agency. In that sense, liberalism recognizes the pre-political rights of each person. In the economic sense, classical liberalism is opposed to excessive state intervention in the natural development of economy which stifles personal freedom and initiative.

(2) *No harm principle*: Individuals are allowed to live as they please as long as they do not harm others in society. Inflicting harm on others equals violating others' right to be free and autonomous in a plural society.

(3) *Social contract*: The state does not have either divine or any other superior authority over individual citizens. The state is a man-made invention that consists of a series of norms, institutions, and agreements. The state is a contract that is established by representative democracy to safeguard negative freedoms The state is established to protect individual freedoms. The state's prerogatives are limited, for the state that violates negative freedoms becomes a null social contract.

(4) *Human rights*: Human rights are seen as non-negotiable, universal human goods that the state recognizes by law. Nevertheless, divisions persist among liberals regarding the basis of human rights. For some, human rights are pre-political, for they are part of human nature. For others, human rights are political, for they are privileges and benefits established by the legislature in thefunction of social expectations that may change over time.

(5) *Pluralism*: Being able to live a life of your own with minimal external interference implies a diversity of lifestyles. Liberals are in favor of pluralistic societies that bring together different world views, races, religions, cultures, and gender. Pluralism is a principal and an expression of liberalism at the same time.

(6) *Ordered liberty*: Responsible moral conduct is *a sine qua non condition* that enables freedom. Liberalism is not about living a careless and predatory lifestyle. On the contrary, from Adam Smith onwards liberals have underlined the importance of responsible conduct. Even Milton Friedman, a much-vilified neoliberal thinker, points out that for-profit business activity is legitimate "so long it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception and fraud"(Friedman, 1970). Just these three simple postulates – free competition, no deception, no fraud – constitute a steep benchmark of business social responsibility. In addition, Friedman underlines the importance of individual responsibility. Whatever companies do or refrain from doing is an outcome of individual responsibility.

Altogether, the classical liberal tradition is the basis of liberal market democracy, a model considered the gold standard of development since the Second World War. As for democracy, this model defines democracy beyond the representative government of the majority. In a liberal democracy, fair and representative elections are a necessary but not sufficient condition for full democratic life. Beyond elections, it also requires impartial rule of law, separation of powers, political checks and balance, and protections of political, social, and economic freedoms that promote social and economic pluralism. Liberal democracy allows for electoral uncertainty, and yet embeds it in a solid institutional framework that defends freedoms of the majority and minorities.[2]

However, illiberal populist regimes question the need to maintain this democratic scaffolding that guarantees majority rule and minority rights. They maintain the relevance of elections and the direct participation of the "people", but question other elements of democratic life. As a consequence, they transform liberal market democracy into illiberal democracy with elements of market economy, as follows (Zakaria, 1997):

[1] (Abbagnano, 1998).
(Law, 2007).
(Garvey and Stangroom, 2012).
(Kelly, 2013).

[2] (Levitzky and Ziblatt, 2019)
(Linz,1996)
(Linz, 2000)

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Liberal Market Democracy	Illiberal Market Democracy
Free, fair, and representative elections	Free, fair, and representative elections
Rule of law	Rule by law
Separation of powers	Politicization of powers
Protection of freedoms & pluralism	Restrictions on freedoms & pluralism

II. Points of Divergence between CST & Liberalism

Pope John XXIII reminds Catholics that they are called to assess the validity of ideological solutions to the world's social and economic problems in the light of the Social Teaching of the Church rather than the other way around (Pope John XXIII, 1961). Nevertheless, the Catholic position towards liberalism has evolved substantially since the pope's Gregory XVI Encyclical Letter Mirari vos which rejected freedom of conscience, freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press as incompatible with the Catholic doctrine (Pope Gregorio XVI, 1832). Nor are liberal values seen today as mere instruments of Freemasonry (Pope Leo XIII, 1884).

In broad terms, CST underlines that freedom is not the absolute value nor the most important social principle. Although freedom is the main expression of human dignity, man's freedom is not absolute. Genuine freedom is the capacity to choose the moral good earmarked by God's natural law (CSDC, 2004: 108; 138; 150-151). Whereas CST acknowledges the relevance of physical freedom from force, terror, and constraint; as well as psychological freedom to pursue the moral good; it sees love as the highest expression of freedom (CSDC, 2004: 143). While liberalism emphasizes freedom *from*, that is, the right to self-determination; the Catholic tradition underlines freedom *to* self-donation and to live by the natural law (CSDC, 2004: 138, 140, 143).

In line with this ontological vision of freedom, a variety of applied arguments have been advanced to show the intrinsic limitations of liberalism and its incompatibility with CST. The following table offers an overview of the most common critics[3]:

Perspective	Stand Point
Social ethics	Liberalism encourages individualism which is corrosive to the family and civil society. It gives little room for charity and solidarity in public life. It may aggravate social and economic polarization by underscoring utilitarian values and market logic permeating all dimensions of social life. It promotes a culture of practical agnosticism by pushingreligion to the public sidelines. It may fuel consumerism and material values at the detriment of spiritual fulfillment. Liberalism may end up in moral emotivism and post-rational hyper-individualism.
Political philosophy	Some strains of liberalism may encourage statism because it encourages expansionary social policy as an essential tool of progress. Other strains tend to harm the provision of public services such as education, healthcare, transportation by emphasizing privatization and the individual right to choose.
Bioethics	Liberalism supports pro-choice, pro-divorce, pro-abortion, pro-euthanasia, pro-gender, pro- homosexual policies which are incompatible with CST. Liberalism is the main vehicle of "the culture of death", and secular modernization that threaten Christian civilization.

[3] (Kenneth, 2019).
(Deneen, 2018).
(Sandel, 2013).
(Carter, 1993).
(Marty and Apple by, 1994).
(Schindler, 1996).
(Glenn, 2010).
(New Polity, 2021).

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Moral theology	Because of its emphasis on pluralism, diversity, and tolerance, it entrenches moral relativism and agnosticism which go against metaphysical realism and dogmatic theology. By relegating religion to the private sphere, liberalism paves the way to political totalitarianism because it voids politics from transcendent values, and by doing so it inverts the teleological cosmic order. It entrenches an inadequate vision of human freedom which emphasizes the value of individual autonomy over the Catholic values of love, solidarity, and ecclesiological community.

III. Points of Convergence between CST & Liberalism

Without denying valid points of divergence, CST and classical liberalism see human liberty as an inalienable human right, which ought to be protected by public authorities. The government is not a "provider" of liberty, but its custodian. Both traditions underline the importance of subsidiarity and decentralization to avoid political oppression (CSDC, 2004: 150-151; 185-186). Freedom is an essential element of the common good and a sine qua non condition of human integral fulfillment.[3]

Freedom is a fundamental principle of social life together with truth, justice, equality, and love (CSDC, 2004: 197). It plays a crucial role in the social life of each society since it is the source of religious, cultural, political, and economic self-expression and participation (CSDC, 2004: 199- 200).

CST and classical liberalism agree on the importance of pluralism as a key element of political and social life, which includes the parents' right to choose education for children (CSDC, 2004: 240-241); freedom of conscience; freedom of economic initiative (CSDC, 2004: 291); religious freedom (CSDC, 2004: 96-97), and freedom of speech (John XXII,1963). Both traditions agree also on "healthy secularity", that is, establishing a lay, autonomous state which is intrinsically superior to any form of the confessional state (Anderson, 2021).

Regarding international relations, they converge on the importance of collaboration and the pursuit of peace, justice, liberty, and environmental stewardship. Both traditions emphasize economic, political, and social tools for building a prosperous and inclusive world order (CSDC 2004: 433, 434-435). Liberalism in international relations emphasizes the importance of international institutions, shared responsibility, universal legal frameworks, and pooled resources. According to that school of thought, systemic problems such as climate change, poverty, hunger and vaccination cannot be addressed effectively on a national basis. They point out that it is a mistake to see nations in isolation from each other. All nations and all people are part of the same "human family" which shares dignity and destiny as "children of God" (CSDC, 2004: 429-431).

The relationship between liberalism and Catholicism has been studied with particular attention in the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States and England. The political and economic culture of both countries has been influenced by Protestantism, Catholicism, and Enlightenment. These three traditions coalesce around the importance of ordered society, reasoned debate, virtuous leadership, civility, mutual respect, and collaboration (Weithman, 1997).[4]

This complimentary is testified by the works of numerous scholars (Michael Novak, Mary Ann Glendon, George Weigel, Daniel K. Finn, Richard Neuhaus), and by the academic activity of various think-tanks, research centers, and foundations that believe in the compatibility between a free society and virtuous behavior. It suffices to mention here the Acton Institute[6], Saint Paul's Institute[7], Centesimus Annus Pro Pontefice Foundation[8], Instytut Tertio Millenio[9], Ethics, and Public Policy Center[10], or Konrad Adenauer Stiftung[11].

Nevertheless, the relationship among different strains of liberalism and CST has grown ever more complex because of fragmentation of the liberal field as well as different social-political perspectives among conservative Catholic thinkers that include traditionalist conservatism, paleoconservatism, cultural or religious-based conservatism, neoconservatism, and libertarian conservatism. These conservative perspectives take different positions regarding the role of the state, the role of the natural law as the basis of the legal order, the right balance between equality and liberty, international relations, social welfare; energy and the environment; civil rights; education; health care; family; immigration; human life issues; defense, and disarmament among others (Krason, 2017).

[4] Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 19; 199-200; 1730-1748; 388-389

[5] (Weithman, 1997).
(Douglas, 1994).
(Billingham, 2021).

[6] https://www.acton.org/

[7] https://www.stpauls.co.uk/calendar/st-pauls-institute-the-protestant-work-ethic-and-the-future-of-work.

[8] https://www.vatican.va/various/fondazione-centesimus-annus/index_en.htm

[9] https://instytuttertio.pl/

[10] https://eppc.org/

[11] https://www.kas.de/pl/web/polen

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IV. The Populist Toolkit

Despite the multiple convergences explored in the previous section, there are populist regimes, some of them avowedly Catholic, that see liberalism as an archenemy of Catholicism. They tend to associate freedom with corruption and decadence. Consequently, they assume it has to be granted under strictly delimited restrictions. They see freedom as a concession. They believe that the public sector should be in charge of all aspects of human and social life.

The right-wing populist dichotomy between freedom and Catholicism is particularly surprising in the case of post-Communist countries in Central Europe such as Poland. The Law & Justice Party (PiS) has defenestrated the legacy of John Paul II and has taken distance from other conservative-liberal intellectual icons such as Maciej Zieba, Adam Boniecki, Tadeusz Pieronek, Józef Życiński, and others. A cursory review of PiS's approach to liberal market democracy and the relationship between society and state reveals not only a profound disconnect, but also a de facto rejection of CST.[12]

The table below presents an illustrative selection of public policies and administrative procedures used by PiS and other "illiberal democratic" populists.

Illiberal Democracy Toolkit	
Legislative Engineering	Re-introduction of rejected draft legislation Late night sessions Commissions' sessions convened at the last minute Discrediting the legitimacy of autonomous bodies
Propaganda	Use of public TV as pro-government propaganda channel Percentage cap on foreign direct investments in the media Alliances with ultra-conservative media: TV Trwam, Radio Maryja Promotion of conspiracy theories
Control of the Judicial	Lowering retirement age for judges Setting up of a disciplinary chamber (DC) for the Supreme Court (SC): the power to suspend members of SC. DC members are nominated by the president. Disciplinary proceedings against judges who adhere to the guidelines of the European Court of Justice Moving judges to provincial courts as a disciplinary measure
Directed Economy	Nepotism in public administration and strategic companies Blacklisting of companies
	Nepotism and clientelism in public procurement and publicadmnistration Debt conversion from foreign currencies to local currencies
Public Morality	"LGBT free zones" Tolerance of ultra-right violence Clampdown on pro-EU and pro-liberal protest Administrative fines for displaying LGBT flags on private property

Not only does the anti-liberal populist regime in Poland has negative impacts on the quality of democracy, and international positioning of the country, but also has not led to an upturn in religious practices despite PiS's avowed Catholicism.

According to the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church, only 36.9% of believers attend Sunday Mass, and only 16.7% take communion in 2021. Both indicators have had a downward tendency since 1990s. Additionally, every year the Catholic Church in Poland registers around 500 official individual apostasies.[13] The same trend is confirmed by CBOS (Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej) which shows that the percentage of believers who attend Sunday Mess declined from 42% in 2015 to 35% in 2021 (the period of Law & Justice governments) (CBOS, 2022). According to another study by CBOS conducted before the parliamentary elections in Poland in 2019, "almost two-fifths of all respondents (38%) believe that the Catholic Church in Poland was involved on the side of some political party or parties before the last election. They almost unanimously declare that it supported the Law and Justice" (EKAI, 2019).

[12] (Grygiel, 2014).
(Stine, 2021).

[13] (Orlikowski, 2021).
(ISKK, 2021).

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Moreover, various members of the Polish Catholic Episcopate does not shy away from clear support for PiS. The supposed defense of "true" Catholic values and national traditions have led an important part of the Polish Catholic clergy to adopt radical anti-liberal positions. Polish press provide sample evidence regarding bishops and priests promoting radical nationalist ideas with clear messianic overtones, antiliberal messages, and clear support for PiS's government.[14]

The rise of illiberal democracy shows that far-right and far-left regimes have much in common despite being at the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Both extremes tend to destroy human freedom. The political proposal of Law & Justice in Poland represents a historical deja vu. PiS brings back a vision of centralizing and omnipotent state typical of the communist past. As the following table shows, the Law & Justice Party offers a nationalist-conservative model focused on protecting society from liberal threats, but that model is a mirror image of the prison society under the communist regime before 1989.

Left-Wing Social Imprisonment (Communism)	Right-Wing Social Protectionism (Pis)
1. Cult of the leader/idea	1. Cult of the nation
2. Espionage and censorship	2. Media, prosecutors, and courts in the hands of "loyalists"
3. "Democratic" uni-party system	3. Electoral authoritarianism
4. Non-market economy	4. Selective market economy
5. Official atheism	5. Preferred (instrumentalized) religion
6. Equality-based welfare	6. Identity-based welfare
7. Closed borders for citizens	7. (Semi-)-closed borders for immigrants depending on ethnic criteria
8. Ideological struggle capitalism vs.communism	8. Ideological struggle liberals vs.conservatives

V. Liberal Catholicism: An Antipopulist Proposal

To live in a pluralistic, open society is not equal to giving up Catholic values. A genuine liberal society ought to make room for peaceful and productive co-existence of people from all walks of life including conservative Catholics and atheists. Perhaps one of the main mistakes among liberals in the last 20 years or so has been to allow classical liberalism to be captured by radical progressive movements and agendas that use aggressive public policies.

Classical liberalism is substantially different from progressive liberalism which becomes intolerant, antireligious, and anticonservative. Unlike progressives, liberals do believe in being virtuous, religious, and free.

It is worth asking to what extent the criticisms explored in section 2.0. apply adequately to classical liberalism. Is it not perhaps that liberalism has become a contemporary scapegoat to be blamed for the consequences of libertarianism, hedonism, nihilism, materialism, woke thinking, and progressivism? Is it not perhaps that liberalism has become a populist invective? Do critiques of liberalism correctly distinguish between classical liberalism, progressive liberalism, libertarianism and their respective implications? (Neuhaus, 1997).

It is relevant to explore further whether antiliberal conservative populism has been successful in correcting the alleged flaws of liberalism. This paper has sought to demonstrate that the antiliberal response is erroneous on the theoretical level and the practical level. The theoretical dimension has been explored in Section 3, and the practical one in section 4.

The instrumentalization of the Catholic faith for political purposes by PiS and other populist parties represents a serious risk of worsening the already weak social perception of the Catholic Church. The damage done by illiberal but supposedly conservative parties like Law & Justice may provoke a further decline of Catholic practices and an allergy to Catholic participation in the public debate, similar to what already happened in Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, the section 3 of this paper has shown a substantial axiomatic convergence between CST and liberalism. This convergence can be illustrated by a Ven diagram of two partially overlapping circles. Although the two circles are not juxtaposed, there exists a common zone of normative agreement regarding limited government, pluralism and participation, subsidiarity, responsible freedom, independent self-realization, economic freedoms, and civic society. It would be a stretch to assume that classical liberalism and CST are identical content-wise. However, it is also a stretch to portray classical liberalism and CST as antagonists. The substantial convergence between the two schools of thought constitutes a viable zone of consensus to rebuild a more centrist politics and to avoid populist

[14] (Bartos, 2013).
(Kozłowska, 2016).
(Makowski, 2016).
(Gadek, 2018).

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extremes which thrive on polarization and limitation of freedom.

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