

Restoring Social Trust: From Populism to Synodality

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Abstract

Social trust has been compromised locally, nationally, and globally, and very recently more and more social scientists, ethicists, theologians, and civic leaders have highlighted its necessity for the function of social life. This article reviews the ways that social trust has been jeopardized and engages indicators that attempt to find where the trust is most at risk and what the better responses to it might be. It then turns to two collective gatherings, populism and synodality, to consider how we might better respond to these different forms of collective movements or gatherings so as to further the restoration of social trust.

Keywords

education, hierarchicalism, inequity, populism, recognition, social trust, synodality

Social trust, measured in terms of the degree to which people have faith in the good will and mutual regard of their civic neighbors and the sound functioning of their society's institutions, has garnered a good deal of attention these last two years. In light of its recent notable decline, researchers are interested in who are most affected by it. Their findings help us see how we should move forward. For instance, though many see populists as threats to social trust, others argue that some of those agents have been victims of government's own disregard, leaving them alienated from any social trust from the start. Similarly, in discussions on how to proceed in another collective movement, synodality, questions are raised regarding whether some

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of its forms could also further alienate church members if bishops derail the synodal process by self-serving practices.

This article seeks to raise up social trust as a worthy indicator of human progress and then investigates how it functions in two collective gatherings: populism and synodality.

Social Trust

In the past few years, we have witnessed a remarkable decline in social trust triggered by a variety of challenges. The rise in populism in the US, Brazil, India, Hungary, Russia, and elsewhere—a palpable rejection of governments’ ordinary ways of proceeding—is the clearest indication of how far social trust has eroded.

The rise in populism paralleled the emergence of COVID. *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, provides an interdisciplinary investigation into the contemporary situation in its Fall 2022 issue, *Institutions, Experts and the Loss of Trust*. There we are reminded that compromising social trust during a global pandemic of a deadly and easily communicable airborne virus makes the matter all the more compelling.¹ Furthermore, again as noted in *Daedalus*, the ubiquity of social media claims (which often elude standards of veracity) promotes more suspicion than trust² and the recent sale of Twitter to Elon Musk hardly raises hope that such trust might be restored.³

Here at home, though the Black Lives Matter movement offers grounds for hope in promoting racial justice in the United States, the repetitive manifestations of racial injustice and the persistent presence of an American White Supremacy movement reveal a key cause for our nation’s continuous decline in social trust.⁴ For Catholics all around the world, the scandals in our churches continue to erode our trust in faith-based institutions.⁵ As we go to press the French episcopacy⁶ and the Baltimore diocese⁷ are the very latest manifestations of an untrustworthy hierarchical culture. If

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1. C. Ross Hatton, Colleen L. Barry, Adam S. Levine, Emma E. McGinty, and Hahrie Han, “American Trust in Science & Institutions in the Time of COVID-19,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 83–97, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01945.
 2. Michael Schudson, “What Does ‘Trust in the Media’ Mean?,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 144–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01948.
 3. Kate Conger, Mike Isaac, Ryan Mac, and Tiffany Hsu, “Two Weeks of Chaos: Inside Elon Musk’s Takeover of Twitter,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/11/technology/elon-musk-twitter-takeover.html>.
 4. Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes, and David C. Wilson, “Race & Political Trust: Justice as a Unifying Influence on Political Trust,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 177–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01950.
 5. Robert Wuthnow, “Religion, Democracy & the Task of Restoring Trust,” *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 200–214, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01951.
 6. Aurelien Breeden, “French Cardinal’s Admission Renews Scrutiny of Church Sexual Abuse,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/08/world/europe/france-catholic-church-sexual-abuse.html>.

these scandals were not enough, the US episcopal conference's latest elections that portend further alienation from the strategies of Pope Francis certainly do not seem to be winning back any of the trust that they so repeatedly compromised.⁸

Moreover, like COVID, the enormous threat of climate change requires that we also attend to the lack of social trust. There is no magic solution that can be provided outside of the very context that bears both the present threats *and* the present social distrust. We can only go forward if we attend to both, for if we cannot work together, we are doomed. We cannot find answers outside of our social contexts.

In the foundational essay of the *Daedalus* volume, "The Discontents of Truth & Trust in 21st Century America," no less than Sheila S. Jasanoff, Harvard's Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology, reminds us that "public knowledge and public authority are interdependent and co-produced."⁹ We will return to her essay, but for now we need to appreciate that it is only within the world producing such threats to social trust that we can find the solutions we need for its restoration.

Of late, major figures have attended to the need for social trust. Francis Fukuyama, author of *Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity*,¹⁰ returned to the theme in the midst of the COVID pandemic and emphatically declared, "Trust is the single most important commodity that will determine the fate of a society."¹¹ In his very perceptive essay, "The Coronavirus Pandemic: Ethical Challenges in Global Public Health," Andrea Vicini astutely calls the pandemic "a social magnifying glass" and remarks on needed measures the Biden administration is taking in institutional leadership "to restore trust."¹²

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7. Ruth Graham, "Maryland Finds That for Hundreds of Clergy Abuse Victims, 'No Parish Was Safe,'" *The New York Times*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/18/us/baltimore-priest-sexual-abuse.html>.
 8. Peter Smith and David Crary, "US Catholic Bishops Elect Timothy Broglio as New President," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/us-catholic-bishops-elect-timothy-broglio-as-new-president/2022/11/15/9bbc2f3c-651f-11ed-b08c-3ce222607059_story.html.
 9. Sheila S. Jasanoff, "The Discontents of Truth & Trust in 21st Century America," *Daedalus* 151, no. 4 (Fall 2022): 25–42 at 32, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01942.
 10. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
 11. Francis Fukuyama, "The Thing That Determines a Country's Resistance to the Coronavirus," *The Atlantic*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>.
 12. Andrea Vicini, "The Coronavirus Pandemic: Ethical Challenges in Global Public Health," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 42, no. 1 (2022): 35–55 at 40, 52, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce202271356>. Following Vicini's "a social magnifying glass" insight, see James F. Keenan, "Rethinking Humanity's Progress in Light of COVID-19," *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 3 (September 2020): 713–35; the thoughtful essay by Carlo Calleja, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'Reverse Contagion' and Roberto Esposito's 'Immunity': Which Way Forward in the Aftermath of the Pandemic?," *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 26–45, 25, 2021 EDT <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18892-gregory-of-nyssa-s-reverse-contagion-and-roberto-esposito-s-immunity-which-way-forward-for-the-pandemic-s-aftermath>; and

Last year Angela Merkel, in stepping down from her remarkable legacy of sixteen years as chancellor of Germany, declared, “The most important capital for politics is trust.” She added, “Our democracy thrives on both our ability to engage in critical debate and to self-correct. It thrives on the constant balancing of interests and on mutual respect. It thrives on solidarity and trust—including trust in facts—and it thrives on the fact that protest must arise wherever scientific findings are denied and conspiracy theories and hate speech are spread.”¹³

Trust is then transactional, in that it undergirds personal, social, and institutional exchanges. Kenneth Arrow noted fifty years ago that “virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time.”¹⁴ More recently, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser write, “Trust is a fundamental element of social capital—a key contributor to sustaining well-being outcomes.”¹⁵ Trust is the fundamental resource that provides the stability, the development, and the sustainability of any institution. Without it, the institution does not function; with it, it can thrive. Unsurprisingly, these authors note that economic inequality erodes trust and, as new data highlight, so do obstacles to educational opportunities; both are systemic problems that harm the capacity for a flourishing social exchange.

Researchers are concerned about the present situation. On June 6, 2022, The Pew Research Center released a study on government and public trust. They found that “public trust in government remains remarkably low as it has for much of the 21st century. Only two-in-ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (2%) or ‘most of the time’ (19%). Trust in the government has declined somewhat since last year, when 24% said they could trust the government at least most of the time.”¹⁶

the spectacular issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology*: Alexandre A. Martins and MT Dávila, eds., *Covid-19 y Ética Teológica en América Latina—Edición Especial—CTEWC* (Emmitsburg, MD: Mount St. Mary’s University, 2021), <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/issue/3259>. On trust, see Daniel Devine, Jennifer Gaskell, Will Jennings, and Gary Stoker, “Trust and the Coronavirus Pandemic: What Are the Consequences of and for Trust? An Early Review of the Literature,” *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2021): 274–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920948684>.

13. “Speech by Federal Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel at the Military Tattoo Given in Her Honour in Berlin on 2 December 2021,” Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, December 2, 2021, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/speech-by-federal-chancellor-dr-angela-merkel-at-the-military-tattoo-given-in-her-honour-in-berlin-on-2-december-2021-1988766>. See also, Katrin Bennhold, “Angela Merkel’s Parting Message to Germany: Trust One Another,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/world/europe/angela-merkel-farewell-germany.html>.
14. Kenneth J. Arrow, “Gifts and Exchanges,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1972): 343–62 at 357.
15. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, “Trust” (2016), <https://ourworldindata.org/trust>.
16. Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022” (Pew Research Center, June 6, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/>.

It was not always this way. When Pew began asking in 1958 about trust in government, “about three-quarters of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time.”¹⁷ They explain:

Trust in government began eroding during the 1960s, amid the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the decline continued in the 1970s with the Watergate scandal and worsening economic struggles. Confidence in government recovered in the mid-1980s before falling again in the mid-1990s. But as the economy grew in the late 1990s, so too did confidence in government. Public trust reached a three-decade high shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but declined quickly thereafter. Since 2007, the shares saying they can trust the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%.¹⁸

In their more extensive report, the researchers comment on the low trust in government among both party members:

As in the past, trust in government is higher among the party of the president than among the “out” party; still, only 29% of Democrats and just 9% of Republicans say they trust the government just about always or most of the time. The share of Republicans expressing trust in the federal government is currently as low as it has been at any point in the last 60 years; levels of trust among Democrats reached historic lows during George W. Bush’s and Donald Trump’s presidencies.¹⁹

Still Americans are hopeful. Just because they do not trust the government does not mean they no longer expect and want the government to meet certain needs. The researchers found:

Americans’ unhappiness with government has long coexisted with their continued support for government having a substantial role in many realms. And when asked how much the federal government does to address the concerns of various groups in the United States, there is a widespread belief that it does *too little* on issues affecting many of the groups asked about, including middle-income people (69%), those with lower incomes (66%) and retired people (65%).²⁰

In an earlier study in 2020, Pew investigated personal trust in other people. They found that social trust builds personal trust. Moreover, they identified growth in both forms of trust as correlating with “broader confidence in democratic institutions, greater communal participation, and fewer reported negative feelings like anxiety and

17. Pew, “Public Trust in Government.”

18. Pew, “Public Trust in Government.”

19. Pew Research Center, “Americans’ Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role” (Pew Research Center, June 6, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/americans-views-of-government-decades-of-distrust-enduring-support-for-its-role/>.

20. Pew, “Americans’ Views of Government.”

depression.”²¹ Appreciating the impact that economic inequality has on trust, they studied personal trust in advanced economies. They found that levels of interpersonal trust were “relatively high,” but two disturbing findings emerged: young people and those with less education do not trust as much.

Regarding young people, the data reflect earlier findings. “Around three-quarters (73%) of U.S. adults under 30 believe people ‘just look out for themselves’ most of the time. A similar share (71%) say most people ‘would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance,’ and six-in-ten say most people ‘can’t be trusted.’ In short, the researchers found that young people find others ‘selfish, exploitative, and untrustworthy’.”²² What they are unable to determine is whether these beliefs will endure. They conclude suggesting, “there is reason to believe that young adults’ views and behaviors might change as they get older—and as the world around them changes.”²³

Still, they noted that today education remains a significant barrier. “In every country surveyed but Japan, trust is lower among people with less education than among those with more education. In 10 of the 14 countries, this education gap is at least 10 percentage points. The gap is widest in Spain, at 22 percentage points. The divide is also large in the U.S. and Netherlands (20 percentage points).” Education promotes personal and social trust.

It is on the topic of education that Catholic ethicists enter into the struggle with social trust. In *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics*, we find that in the United States “access to a major university diminishes year by year for lower-income and working-class people.”²⁴ Those growing inequities further alienate and clearly erode the social trust of those wanting to participate in the common good. The path to restoring social trust requires the recognition of these inequities and a new mutual vulnerability between those alienated by inequities in income and education and those capable of addressing them.²⁵

The elephant in the room of American disinterest in social equality is the community college. Remarkably, twelve million students at community colleges make up 41 percent of the general undergraduate student body in the United States.²⁶ Still, as the

21. Aidan Connaughton, “Social Trust in Advanced Economies Is Lower among Young People and Those with Less Education” (Pew Research Center), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/03/social-trust-in-advanced-economies-is-lower-among-young-people-and-those-with-less-education/>.

22. John Gramlich, “Young Americans Are Less Trusting of Other People—and Key Institutions—than Their Elders” (Pew Research Center, August 6, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/06/young-americans-are-less-trusting-of-other-people-and-key-institutions-than-their-elders/>.

23. Gramlich, “Young Americans.”

24. James F. Keenan, *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit from a Culture of Ethics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 208, see 208–17 and the chapter on “Commodification,” 173–200.

25. James F. Keenan, “Social Trust and the Ethics of Our Institutions,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (October 11, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce2022101067>.

26. James F. Keenan, “The Community Colleges: Giving Them the Ethical Recognition They Deserve,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, no. 2 (2020): 143–64, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18040-the-community-colleges-giving-them-the-ethical-recognition-they-deserve>.

Chronicle of Higher Education notes, “Graduation rates at two-year public colleges are notoriously low, and have long been criticized for inadequately reflecting the value of these colleges to students.”²⁷ Worse there is very little academic research on community colleges addressing the alienation and inequities that their students and faculty members face. In fact, as Philo Hutcheson revealed more than twenty years ago and which remains the case today, university researchers are not prone to investigate the situation of the underfunded, fundamentally unrecognized community college because they do not consider community colleges as belonging to higher education!²⁸

The alienation starts from the top. If we do not address the specific problems of more than 40 percent of those attempting a degree of higher education, we cannot be surprised at a growing lack of social trust found among those with lower levels of education.

The community college is not the only problematic passageway to a degree in higher education, as a collection on university ethics in the *Journal of Moral Theology* recently highlighted. Conor Kelly warns against universities that “increasingly see themselves through the eyes of a corporate model that defines the university as a business embedded in an industry that must serve market forces.” He sees that the mission of Catholic universities is being compromised by the appropriation of a model with very different inherent goals.²⁹ Matthew J. Gaudet provides an overall trajectory of how the university itself is only at an incipient stage in appreciating how it needs to move from causing alienation to resolving it.³⁰ Then, in addressing contemporary issues, Megan McCabe argues that the university needs to transform rather than discipline its existing rape culture.³¹ Laurie Johnston reminds us of the challenges of a growing diversified college campus in her article on the presence of Muslims at Catholic colleges, while Teresa Nance highlights the overall challenges of achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.³²

27. “How Low Graduation Rates Camouflage Student Success at Community Colleges,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2020, www.chronicle.com/article/How-Low-Graduation-Rates/247802.

28. Philo A. Hutcheson, “Reconsidering the Community College,” *History of Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1999): 307–20.

29. Conor Kelly, “A Crisis of Mistaken Identity: The Ethical Insufficiency of the Corporate University Model,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 23–48, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18036-a-crisis-of-mistaken-identity-the-ethical-insufficiency-of-the-corporate-university-model>.

30. Matthew J. Gaudet, “University Ethics: The Status of the Field,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 1–22, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18034-university-ethics-the-status-of-the-field>.

31. Megan McCabe, “Discipline Is Not Prevention: Transforming the Cultural Foundations of Campus Rape Culture,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 49–71, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18037-discipline-is-not-prevention-transforming-the-cultural-foundations-of-campus-rape-culture>.

32. Laurie Johnston, “Catholic Universities and Religious Liberty,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 91–116, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18035-catholic-universities-and-religious-liberty>; Teresa Nance, “Diversity,

The master of identifying the pathway to greater equity in Catholic higher education is Gerald J. Beyer who, in his important work, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education*, has proffered Catholic Social Teaching as the corrective for contemporary administrative governance at the Catholic university.³³ In addressing the administration, Beyer is summoning the Catholic university back to one of its original goals, that of bringing social mobility to a group that stood at the margins of society. Like Beyer, others make more specific suggestions for reform. Lev Rickards and Shannon Kealey, for instance, suggest a turn to “Jesuit values,”³⁴ while faculty from Villanova and Santa Clara refer to programs and centers at their universities that highlight how universities need to more purposefully see whether they are contributing de facto to the common good.³⁵ These turns are part of a much greater task of making the university more capable of educating equitably. Hopefully the pathway to equity is in part a bridge for cultivating social trust.

These investigations are important in terms of the flourishing of the common good. In the much-cited groundbreaking study on social trust from 2000, we learned from Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker that “whether citizens judge politicians or government trustworthy influences whether they become politically active, how they vote, whether they favor policy or institutional reforms, whether they comply with political authorities, and whether they trust one another.”³⁶ Social trust breeds engagement and interpersonal trust; the lack of social trust does not. The resistance that we will see in populism is in part a resistance to social trust but that is, I believe, a response by some of the agents of populism to their experience of alienation from equity and education.

Still the issue of social trust is deeper and more pervasive than we might recognize. In her essay, Jasanoff explains that “standards of epistemic correctness do not stand outside of politics but are configured through the same processes of social

Equity, and Inclusion—Doing the Work of Mission in the University,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 229–42, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18043-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-doing-the-work-of-mission-in-the-universit>.

33. Gerald J. Beyer, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).
34. Lev Rickards and Shannon Kealey, “The System of Scholarly Communication through the Lens of Jesuit Values,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 117–42, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18039-the-system-of-scholarly-communication-through-the-lens-of-jesuit-values>.
35. Mark J. Doorley, “The Ethics Program at Villanova University: A Story of Seed Sowing,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 185–208, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18041-the-ethics-program-at-villanova-university-a-story-of-seed-sowing>; Brian Patrick Green, David DeCosse, Kirk Hanson, Don Heider, Margaret R. McLean, Irina Raicu, and Ann Skeet, “A University Applied Ethics Center: The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 9, Special Issue 2 (2020): 209–28, <https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18042-a-university-applied-ethics-center-the-markkula-center-for-applied-ethics-at-santa-clara-university>.
36. Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker, “Political Trust and Trustworthiness,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 475–507 at 501, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475>.

authorization as political legitimacy. It follows that any attempt to build trust solely on the basis of the claimed robustness of science, without addressing the associated politics, is likely to founder under stress."³⁷ If we try to leave the alienated behind, we cannot, as we are witnessing, respond effectively to the global problems at our doors.

Jasanoff examines the singularity of the US argument that science speaks for itself; whether on the effectiveness of masks, vaccines, or quarantines, she found, "trust eroded most where the alleged objectivity of science was called to substitute for a more open politics of representation, aggregation, and bridging." Jasanoff's insights should remind us of the classic insistence that grammar requires rhetoric and that data need appropriate forms of communication. She concludes:

Insisting on the superior authority of science without attending to the politics of reason and persuasion will not restore trust in either knowledge or power. Instead, trust can be regained with more inclusive processes for framing policy questions, greater attentiveness to dissenting voices and minority views, and more humility in admitting where science falls short and policy decisions must rest on prudence and concern for the vulnerable.³⁸

Recognizing and attending to these matters will help us better respond to populism and to promote synodality, since social trust cannot be reconstructed without attending to those who experience alienation. Strategies of inclusion are constitutive for restoring social trust.

In "Race & Political Trust: Justice as a Unifying Influence on Political Trust," three social scientists, Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes, and David C. Wilson, provide further indications that when equity is furthered, trust is often gained. They note at the outset that "Americans' trust in government is lower than ever. However, while all groups have seen a decline in trust since the 1960s, the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites in this period has varied not only in size but also in direction." In fact, they observe: "At times, racial and ethnic minorities have actually had higher rates of trust than Whites, contradicting the broad assumptions in research about race and political trust. Explanations of the causes of trust in government that emphasize institutional experience and early socialization would not predict this outcome."³⁹ They propose that

an underutilized component in the study of race and political trust is perceived justice. On one hand, racial and ethnic minorities' sensitivity to institutional injustice often leads to lower rates of trust. On the other hand, when racial and ethnic minorities perceive there are greater opportunities for racial progress, which signal that widespread harm can be repaired, their political trust tends to increase, sometimes to levels that exceed those for Whites.⁴⁰

37. Jasanoff, "Discontents," 32.

38. Jasanoff, "Discontents," 25.

39. Wu, Wilkes, and Wilson, "Race & Political Trust," 177.

40. Wu, Wilkes, and Wilson, "Race & Political Trust," 177.

The authors conclude that “the interplay between political realities that shape perceived justice as well as political hope for racial progress likely creates the variable longitudinal patterns of racial and ethnic differences in trust.”⁴¹

It is from these notions of alienation from equity and the impact of perceived justice that we now turn to populism.

Populism

On September 24–25, 2021, a major Catholic university in India, Bangalore’s CHRIST (Deemed to be University), hosted an international virtual conference entitled “The New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century.”⁴² The conference attracted well-reputed authors from around the world to contribute to a soon-to-be-launched *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*, being published by Springer.

Cultural, political, economic, religious, and sociological experts addressed the conference. Later, in my submission to the *Encyclopedia*, I argued for the need to distinguish the five different agents of populism: the masses themselves, their leaders, the wealthy who fund the leaders, other institutional opportunists who capitalize on the inroads made by the populists movement, and finally the so-called elite: the government’s lawmakers who have the opportunity to respond but do not yet recognize the validity of those populists’ claims regarding their own non-recognition and resulting inequities and subsequent alienation.⁴³

Rather than following populism, as defined by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, as an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people,”⁴⁴ we should see that populism is much more complicated than a simple confrontational group critiquing the elite. Indeed, the American political

41. Wu, Wilkes, and Wilson, “Race & Political Trust,” 177.

42. “New Populism and Responses of the 21st Century,” *Conference on New Populism 2021*, September 24–25, 2021, <https://npc.christuniversity.in/about>. “Deemed to be University” is an accreditation bestowed by the Indian government.

43. James F. Keenan, “The Five Agents of the New Populism,” in *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*, ed. Joseph Chacko Chennattussery, Madhumati Deshpande, and Paul Hong (New York: Springer, forthcoming). More recently, I published an abbreviated, more accessible argument: James F. Keenan, “Populism Isn’t Going Anywhere: Elites Need to Listen to the Masses to Rebuild Our Democracy,” *America*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/12/14/populism-trump-democracy-241992>.

44. Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (March 2014): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; see also Cas Mudde, “How Populism Became the Concept that Defines Our Age,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/populism-concept-defines-our-age>.

scientist Bart Bonikowski captures populism better in calling it not a reductive ideology of confrontation but rather different ways of framing political discourse.⁴⁵ Therein his multiple discourses and our multiple agents overlap. Let us examine my typology of populism.

The Populist Masses

The populist masses are generally people from the working class or some other lower-caste category who weave resentful narratives of social abandonment by the elites. As populists, their anger is not primarily over economics or education per se,⁴⁶ but rather over the elite's social exclusion of them. They want the elites who exclude them out of office because of the elite's perceived condescension and apparent indifference. They represent a large social mass of hard-felt anger based on a collective group's tangibly experienced sense of exclusion and disregard. Hillary Clinton's dismissal of "the deplorables"⁴⁷ was a recorded instance of that exclusion and disregard.

Resentfulness governs the populist mass. Indeed, in the literature on populism the language of resentment emerges particularly when talking about this first group of agents. In 2019, *Foreign Policy* referred to populism as the "resentment epidemic."⁴⁸ Since then researchers have written about the specific vice of resentment and its function within this community of actors.⁴⁹ From the theological world, Vincent Lloyd warns us to investigate the anger in these social movements, arguing that were it seriously engaged, we might discover "the questions of domination" and "possibilities for flourishing in a radically different world."⁵⁰

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45. Bart Bonikowski, "Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 9–24, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/bonikowski/files/bonikowski_-_three_lessons_of_contemporary_populism_in_the_united_states_and_europe.pdf.
46. Yotam Margalit, "Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26796840.pdf>.
47. "To just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the 'basket of deplorables.'" See Roxanne Roberts, "Hillary Clinton's 'deplorables' speech shocked voters five years ago—but some feel it was prescient," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/08/31/deplorables-basket-hillary-clinton/>; Amy Chozick, "Hillary Clinton Calls Many Trump Backers 'Deplorables,' and G.O.P. Pounces," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/us/politics/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables.html>.
48. Roberto Stefan Foa and Jonathan Wiltom, "The West Has a Resentment Epidemic," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-west-has-a-resentment-epidemic-populism/>.
49. See, for instance, Jean L. Cohen, "Populism and the Politics of Resentment," *Jus Cogens* 1 (2019): 5–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42439-019-00009-7>.
50. Vincent Lloyd, "Anger: A Secularized Theological Concept," in *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 25–39, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004498327_003.

Because mutual recognition and political engagement is needed between these agents and the elite, we will not see a development in social trust here until the long-standing resentfulness in these populist masses is addressed.

The Populist Leader

When Bonikowski refers to populism as a “discursive frame,” he refers to populism’s “practice of presenting an issue from a particular perspective in order to maximize its resonance with a given audience.”⁵¹ He adds that “populism, thus, becomes a strategic tool selected based on context, with the latter consisting of the characteristics of the audience, the speaker’s own political background and career aspirations, and the political position of the speaker and his or her party.”⁵²

Here we need to distinguish the populist leader from the populist masses. The populist leader taps into and articulates the grounds for the resentfulness by first casting themselves as also rejected or as contemptible by the elite. Though the leader does not belong to the populist mass, they do give voice to their lament and cry for recognition.

Indeed, Bonikowski suggests that for populist leaders, the longer they stay in office, the less inclined they are to invoke the populist’s lament. They eventually set the frame for their own ascendancy on their own interests, rather than on the masses’ needs for incorporation. In short, if the populists put their leader into office, invariably the leader will eventually pursue their own interests and not those of their supporters.

It is important to appreciate, however, that regardless of how opportunistic this second agent is, their role in populism is that it is they and not the populist masses themselves that articulate the populist masses’ understanding of the situation. The leader taps into an unarticulated resentfulness and gives it voice by identifying the elite as the cause of the resentfulness. Trump and Reagan both did that in their presidencies. The working-class populists were not the leaders of their movement. Rather proponents who articulated the populist masses’ perceived situation received the support of the masses because they recognized the grounds of their resentfulness.

Elites would do well to look sympathetically on the rhetoric of the populist leader—not to validate the populist’s own opportunistic ego or their agenda, but rather to understand why the populist leader is so able to socially connect with a long-alienated population. These questions of the rhetorical resonance of the populist leader, so frequently dismissed by the elite, need to be studied by the elite. The success of the populist leader is an indictment of the neglect of the elite.

The Wealthy

In “How Billionaires Learned to Love Populism,” Amy Chua discusses “billionaire populism,” noting that Donald Trump “appointed the wealthiest Cabinet in modern

51. Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 10.

52. Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 14

history.” Chua adds that in affiliating himself with the “people”—that is, those described as the populist masses, who have been long unrecognized—“Trump has done a remarkable job presenting himself as being on their team, creating a tribal bond between a celebrity billionaire and blue-collar voters.” Chua notes, “The tribal instinct is all about identification. For many lower-income Americans, being anti-establishment is not the same as being anti-rich. This is the key to the new billionaire populism, and its roots lie deep in American history.”⁵³

These billionaires helped Trump mount an enormous war chest in his campaign for reelection, one that the populist masses could never have afforded. Trump could not have succeeded without them, and he used them to create a regime that could afford to be unaccountable. Yet these billionaires have no real interest in the plight of the populist masses except that they enjoy the populist masses’ power in electing and supporting Trump. Trump, and other populist leaders, understood not only their need for the populist masses, but also Trump’s need for financial supporters of incredible wealth. They rewarded the wealthy for their interest in the movement with tax breaks and other accommodations.

Though populists before Trump, such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, targeted the rich, other populists (such as Boris Johnson) cultivated the wealthy successfully without alienating the leader’s power base.

Other Political and Cultural and Social leaders

The fourth group consists of political parties and the religious, social, and cultural leaders who use the populist leader and populist masses for their own gain. This group is made up of leaders of long-standing social and cultural institutions that compromise the identity of their own institutions so as to profit from the present populist surge. Leaders from the Republican Party, the evangelical church, and the Roman Catholic Church gave a sense of civic legitimacy to Trump and were notably silent when he attempted to launch a coup against the US government on January 6, 2021. Unlike the wealthy whose own self-gain is the same as the populist leader, this group compromises their cultural and social institutions by their parasitic relationship to the populist leader, mostly because they fear that without populism their own power would diminish.

If these social institutions are to survive into the future, they will eventually need to repudiate the actions of leaders who compromised their mission identity with their cultural support and momentary validation of the populist leader. In the meantime, Robert Wuthnow, the noted American sociologist of religion, focuses his attention on social trust by looking at religious organizations and examines “the documented alienation induced by religious leaders who align themselves with political

53. Amy Chua, “How Billionaires Learned to Love Populism,” *Politico*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/how-wealthy-elite-billionaires-donald-trump-learned-to-love-populism-politics/>.

candidates and policies, especially on the right.”⁵⁴ He wonders whether “religious leaders seeking to curb what they regard as secularity by engaging in partisan politics may be harming rather than strengthening their own institutions.”⁵⁵ Wuthnow is even more concerned with religious leaders’ participation in the politicization of trust, or as columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. has termed it, “the weaponization of mistrust.”⁵⁶ Wuthnow writes:

The more pressing question is whether religion, especially when it is politically weaponized, encourages or discourages trust in other institutions: science, medicine, higher education, government, the media? The history of religion in this regard is quite mixed, as debates about the teaching of evolution, faith healing and scientific medicine, and antivaccination crusades have shown.

He concludes, “In the current ‘post-truth’ context, in which any statement can be called ‘fake news’—or denied having been uttered at all—distrust has become a political weapon wielded for partisan purposes, including by religious leaders.”⁵⁷ We will see later, in our discussion of synodality, the need to differentiate the agency of the leaders from the agency of the community itself.

Elsewhere, out of concerns like these, Swedish theologian Matthias Martinson proposes an attentiveness to these compromises by opportunistic church leaders and argues for the need for new theological insights to engage “the forceful dialectics of a secular society and a strong Christian heritage.”⁵⁸ Similarly Mariëtta D. C. van der Tol asks, “Can political theology develop a framework for positive engagement with culture which reasserts belief in the church’s engagement with culture, without claiming an exclusive cultural normativity?”⁵⁹ Maybe church leaders need eventually to make peace with secularism, especially when their congregation members already have.

54. Wuthnow, “Religion, Democracy & Trust,” 204. For more on the harm brought by politicized religious leaders see, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (2002): 165–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088891>; and David E. Campbell, “The Perils of Politicized Religion,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 87–104, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_01805.

55. Wuthnow, “Religion, Democracy & Trust,” 204.

56. E. J. Dionne Jr., “Trump Is Weaponizing Evangelicals’ Mistrust: And He’s Succeeding,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-weaponizing-evangelicals-mistrust-and-hes-succeeding/2019/08/21/e2df0d5e-c436-11e9-9986-1fb3e4397be4_story.html.

57. Wuthnow, “Religion, Democracy & Trust,” 204.

58. Matthias Martinson, “Populism, Christianity, and the Role of the Theologian,” in *The Spirit of Populism*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 132–46 at 132, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004498327_010.

59. Mariëtta D. C. van der Tol, “The Politics of Belonging in the Nation State: Reclaiming Christianity from Populism,” in Schmiedel and Ralston, *The Spirit of Populism*, 57–69 at 57. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004498327_005.

The Elites

The fifth group is the elite. Inasmuch as the other four agents frame their discourses to counter the legitimacy of the elite in liberal democracies, the elite are often not considered agents in populist affairs. Yet, as we have seen, their negligence and their actual attempts to further demoralize the populists contribute to the legitimacy of the populist movement. For this reason, we must recognize their agency.

I believe the fundamental failure of the elites is the failure to recognize the members of the populist mass as worthy of belonging as participatory citizens. Philosophers like Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Paddy McQueen, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Sohn⁶⁰ argue that recognition entails an awakening from a tendency to overlook or ignore to an acknowledgement of the rightful dignity of others. They propose that we respond through an encounter of mutual vulnerability to the dignity of others who have not yet been given their socially due recognition. A recent contribution by Honneth makes the significance of recognition all the more urgent.⁶¹ The force of populism bears witness to the human need for recognition, though many of the elites do not yet understand that need.

Moreover, they are in part responsible for the original non-recognition of what later emerged as a populist movement. In this they are similar to the masses they ignore: they each consider themselves victims and acquit themselves of any moral wrongdoing. The elite have overlooked many in their maintenance of liberal democracies and kept them in place in the elite's evident hierarchies. But often their agency, their "causative" role in the development of the populist claims, goes unacknowledged.

No less than Nancy Fraser rightly takes them to task. In a recent interview she said:

I am not unhappy that those who have been screwed by progressive neo-liberalism are rising up against it. In some cases, of course, the form their rebellion takes is problematic. Scapegoating immigrants, Muslims, Blacks, Jews, and others, they often mistake the true cause of their troubles. But it is counterproductive to simply dismiss them as irredeemable racists and Islamophobes. To assume that at the outset is to surrender any possibility of winning them to the left, whether to left-wing populism or democratic socialism. . . . My

60. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); David Pellauer and Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, eds., *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso Books, 2003); Paddy McQueen, "Social and Political Recognition," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://www.iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/. I have found very helpful Michael Sohn, *The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Religion in the Thought of Lévinas and Ricoeur* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

61. Axel Honneth, *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

point is that all these voters (and others!) have legitimate grievances against progressive neo-liberalism.⁶²

In particular, she criticizes the social hierarchy that the elite are often espousing: “They lack even the slightest idea of a structural transformation or an alternative political economy. Far from seeking to abolish social hierarchy, their whole mindset is aimed at getting more women, gays, and people of colour into its top ranks. Certainly, in the US but also elsewhere, the left has been colonised by liberalism.”⁶³

Fraser’s clarion call for recognizing the legitimacy of the populist’s lament is critical. Much of the theological reflection on populism is often a critique of the populists’ scapegoating, as Fraser names it.⁶⁴ But that criticism lets theologians, while defending the scapegoats, overlook yet again the complaint of the “deplorable” masses. In a much different way, Jonathan Champlin tries to separate the toxicity of populism from the lament and concern of some of the masses. He proposes that in order to respond properly to populism, we need “a prior, normative theological conception of the *populus*.” He suggests “‘the political community,’ from the specification of which a series of related concepts such as nation, common good, justice, equality, sovereignty, citizenship, representation, and participation find their proper meaning.”⁶⁵ By recognizing those within the populist masses as being within and among “we the people,” other leaders can offer a healing, corrective passageway to those looking for incorporation.

Though there are five different agents in the new populism, the ones more interested in the good of governance and the good of the common good are, I believe, among the populist masses and the elite of government. They need to engage one another directly by eliminating social hierarchies. Others interested in the common good, democracy, and good governance need to help them build that bridge. Indeed, those who highlight the idea of recognition insist it is better known as mutual recognition. For social trust is generated through mutual vulnerability and recognition. As Kevin Vallier and Michael Weber note on the first page of their volume entitled *Social*

62. Shray Mehta, “Can We Understand Populism without Calling It Fascist? A Conversation with Nancy Fraser,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 53, no. 2 (June 2018), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/populism-contemporary-historical-moment-conversation-nancy-fraser>.

63. Mehta, “A Conversation with Nancy Fraser.”

64. See for instance, Jeffery Haynes, “Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Europe and the USA,” *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 490, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100490>; Justin Hawkins, “The War of All Against One: Why Christians Should Not Be Populists,” Delivered at the 2019 Henry Institute Symposium on Christianity and Politics (Calvin College, April 26, 2019), <https://mercorthodoxy.com/war-one-christians-not-populists/>.

65. Jonathan Chaplin, “A Political Theology of ‘The People’: Enlisting Classical Concepts for Contemporary Critique,” in Schmiedel and Ralston, *The Spirit of Populism*, 229–43 at 229, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004498327_016. Similarly, see Doug Gay, “Discipling Populism: A Theopolitical Alternative to Denial or Demonizing,” in Schmiedel and Ralston, *The Spirit of Populism*, 212–25, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004498327_015. Also, Jonathan Chaplin, *Faith in Democracy: Framing a Politics of Deep Diversity* (London: SCM Press, 2021); Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

Trust, “Most scholars see trust as a product of durable mutual expectations about cooperative moral behavior.”⁶⁶

In a way, these two groups, in order to build social trust, need to learn a new form of discourse with one another. We will see a particular form of such a Spirit-led discourse in synodality in the next section, but here in concluding populism, we note that in Africa there is a form of discourse that is deliberately designed to be reconciling. In his book on stability in postcolonial African states, Congolese Jesuit Emmanuel Bueya notes that “instability starts when people no longer trust each other.”⁶⁷ He proposes the African palaver, a discourse method that helps bring communities into new spaces so that they can resolve conflict among themselves. Palaver offers a reconciling space within the community; it operates before external mediators are needed. As Bueya writes, “the palaver is a great means of reconciliation.”⁶⁸ There is evident congruency between the African palaver ethics and synodality. Stan Chu Ilo notes that “the African palaver is the art of conversation, dialogue, and consensus-building in traditional society that can be appropriated in the current search for a more inclusive and expansive participatory dialogue at all levels of the life of the Church.”⁶⁹

In rebuilding social trust, we need to form ways of connecting that are both reconciling and hope-filled, based on mutual recognition and human vulnerability. In that light, the call to synodality by Pope Francis seems, especially for the Roman Catholic, a summons of some moment.

Synodality

In the previous section, we see a variety of ideas proposed by theologians, philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists trying to repair the most obvious affront to social trust, populism. By distinguishing the agents and their frameworks of discourse, we can see ways through vulnerability and mutual recognition to restore the much-needed social trust.

Wuthnow makes a similar point about the need for reform so as to bring about needed social trust: “When religious groups willingly dispute the basic facts of scientific medicine, endorse the false claims of political strategists, and deride people whose religious convictions differ from theirs—when religious groups fail to treat one another according to basic principles of trust and toleration—then religion functions more to facilitate authoritarianism than to support democracy.” He argues that “for religious leaders to restore the public’s and, indeed, their own members’ trust in the religious institutions that have served America so well in the past . . . , they must be attentive to

66. Kevin Vallier and Michael Weber, eds., *Social Trust: Foundational and Philosophical Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1.

67. Emmanuel Bueya, *Stability in Postcolonial African States* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 74.

68. Bueya, *Stability*, 104.

69. Stan Chu Ilo, “Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory Synodal Church,” *Exchange* 50, no. 3/4 (2021): 209–37 at 209, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341600>.

the basic principles within their own traditions of how to live amicably and respectfully among those with whom they disagree.”⁷⁰

In the church, the call to respond to the lack of social trust similarly belongs to the elite, in our case, the hierarchy. Yet the discussion on synodality has led us to understand that the method for restoring that trust cannot be solely or simply in their hands. In fact, the way that many bishops have acted as hierarchy has been the very reason for invoking the need for synodality, the call to reform, and the need to address the decline of social trust.

The pope’s initiatives in synodality have been seen as restorative. As Richard Gaillardetz describes in his essay in *Concilium*, synodality is “the central theological leitmotif of the Francis Pontificate. It represents a genuine reception and development of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.”⁷¹ The method and the promise of synodality emphasize how it might guide the church into a new way of discourse and even a new way of being, though one very connected to its own founding.

Often, however, before describing what synodality is, writers first emphasize what it rejects. Gaillardetz, for instance, notes, “Synodality challenges a toxic hierarchology and invites fresh perspectives on public ‘ordered’ ministry in the church, ordained and non-ordained. Finally, the principle of synodality also challenges the current shape of Roman Catholic episcopal governance.”⁷² In the same issue of *Concilium*, the Dominican Hervé Legrand makes a plea for learning, noting that “authoritarian clerical ecclesiology inherited from the long 19th century is in a systemic crisis.” He concludes that “the rise of synodality will provide a remedy.”⁷³ Finally, Massimo Faggioli raises questions about the non-critical stance of the International Theological Commission (ITC) that authored “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.”⁷⁴ He comments that “the limits of the ITC document say something about the limits of the vision of synodality in Francis’s pontificate.” He concludes by warning against forms of synodality laden with hierarchical controls that never enter into the true spirit of synodality. He advocates for synodal reform through new institutions of synodality.⁷⁵

70. Wuthnow, “Religion, Democracy & Trust,” 211; see also, Robert Wuthnow, *Why Religion Is Good for American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

71. Richard Gaillardetz, “The Synodal Shape of Church Ministry and Order,” *Concilium* 2 (2021): 98–108 at 98.

72. Gaillardetz, “The Synodal Shape,” 98. Gaillardetz investigates the shape of episcopal governance as problematic in Richard Gaillardetz, “The Chimera of a ‘Deinstitutionalized Church’: Social Structure Analysis as a Path to Institutional Church Reform,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 2 (2022): 219–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221091289>.

73. Hervé Legrand, “Synodality is a Matter of Practice: A Plea for Learning,” *Concilium* 2 (2021): 119–29 at 119.

74. International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” (March 2, 2018), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

75. Massimo Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy,’” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 352–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140020916034>.

When Gaillardetz examines the hierarchy, he first refers to my essay on hierarchicalism, which appeared last year in *Theological Studies* on the toxic culture of the hierarchy.⁷⁶ There I argued against the frequent use of the concept of “clericalism” as inadequate to capture the true focus of needed reform in the church. Clericalism leaves us examining the culture of priestly life and never really prompts us to look at the culture of episcopal life.

We need then to distinguish the two, not because clericalism is not vicious and problematic; it is. We have to better understand, however, the specific problems of that other culture more isolated and protected than priests’ and certainly more complex, insidious, and driven than we know or acknowledge.

I often think of clericalism in terms of precious priests who forget they were called, but who understand themselves as elite. They are pretentious and self-important. But challenge a cleric and you find a man who has very little power though a lot of attitude. Challenge him further when you both realize he is without power and he becomes whiney and resentful.

Challenge a hierarch and you encounter a network of power, a firm wall of resistance with a wide variety of options. The culture of clericalism has none of the resources of hierarchicalism. If we think clericalism is hard to dismantle, it is nothing like dismantling hierarchicalism. Indeed, the only way clericalism has survived to today is not because of the power of priests, but because of the powerful connections of hierarchy. Hierarchicalism seeks the survival of clericalism, for the former is the father and promoter of the second. Hierarchicalism hides, then, behind clericalism and scapegoats it as well. Until we identify it as such, we are pawns of its own power games. And until we face with them this problem, we will not see reform.

As I noted last year, the new wave of abuse scandals that broke in 2018 across the universal church were not about priests but rather bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, most in this instance as predators. That wave finally exposed the real source of this entire crisis: behind each of the previous waves was a hierarchicalism, a culture that exercised its power and networking capabilities in the cover-up of their own actions since 1991.

In 2018, in Malta I presented this concept of hierarchicalism for the first time arguing that the cause of the crisis came not primarily from the culture of secrecy and privilege of priests, but of the power of the episcopacy and its attendant networks, privileges, and power options that circumnavigated the investigations of civil leaders. It would be a mistake to label the actions of the episcopacy as stemming from the ubiquitous clericalism; rather, I identified the exclusive power culture of the episcopacy as hierarchicalism and proposed an ethics of vulnerability as assisting the hierarchy in recuperating their noble service ministry.⁷⁷

76. James F. Keenan, “Hierarchicalism,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 84–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639211070493>; James F. Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” *Melita Teologica* 68, no. 2 (2018): 129–42.

77. Keenan, “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism,” 129–42.

Ecclesiologists like Gaillardetz, Legrand, and Faggioli specifically identify the toxic culture and conduct of our hierarchy as an obstacle to growing in synodality. We should note the descriptive: we are distinguishing the toxic culture of hierarchicalism from a culture of servant leadership. Bishops participate in either one or the other. The threat to synodality and social trust is not, then, the bishops, but is the toxic culture that forms them: hierarchicalism. Thus, Robert Billing proposes synodality as “moving beyond clericalism and hierarchicalism to make way for reciprocal listening, discernment and dialogue among all Christ’s faithful.”⁷⁸

Arguably the finest introduction to synodality comes from Ireland in a volume edited by Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy, and Mary McDaid, entitled *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality*. There, Patrick Treacy, in his essay “Hierarchicalism and its Implications for a Synodal Style of Governance,” differentiates true from false synodality by showing how in the call for synodality, hierarchicalism can co-opt any synod it wants. There “hierarchicalism operates to create the pretense of the hierarchy genuinely listening to others, to be ‘journeying’ with them or sharing in their suffering, when in truth the underlying and controlling intent is to preserve the existing hierarchical status and structures of authority within Church.”⁷⁹ Treacy adds, “Hierarchicalism, by its very nature, can never be synodal. It is the antithesis of what synodality is. Accordingly, ‘hierarchical synodality’ is not simply an oxymoron” but is “entirely contradictory” of synodality. He lists on four pages “characteristics of hierarchical synodality” and then similarly warns against a “clericalisation of the laity.”⁸⁰ These are already forms of synodality that have been tried and failed.

Synodality then is seen as not only a newer pathway but as a reforming one, capable of restoring social trust. It reforms not only how we gather as church but how we see leadership in that gathering. From Chile, Sandra Arenas warns against the present forms of hierarchical synodality that compromise the entire pathway to reform: “One observes in its design, management, structure, and administration, a distance from the local churches and their parishioners, which devitalizes it.”⁸¹ From South Korea, Seil Oh makes a similar claim of synodality as bringing reform and restoring social trust.⁸²

78. Robert Billing, “The Presbyteral Council as an Expression of Synodality” (PhD. diss., St. Paul University, 2022), 297, <http://dx.doi.org/10.20381/ruor-28371>.

79. Patrick Treacy, “Hierarchicalism and Its Implications for a Synodal Style of Governance,” in *The Synodal Pathway: When Rhetoric Meets Reality*, ed. Eamonn Conway, Eugene Duffy, and Mary McDaid (Dublin: Columba, 2022), 204–20 at 209.

80. Treacy, “Hierarchicalism and Its Implications,” 214–17.

81. Sandra Arenas, “The Awakening of Chile: Demands for Participation and the Synodal Church,” *Louvain Studies* 45, no. 1 (2022): 97–111 at 99–100, <https://doi.org/10.2143/LS.45.1.3290309>; see Sandra Arenas, “Ecclesial Extroversion: On the Reform in the Current Pontificate,” in *Changing the Church: Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Mark D. Chapman and Vladimir Latinovic (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53425-7_36.

82. Seil Oh, “The Crisis of Korean Catholic Church in the Post-Secular Society: In the Light of the Legitimacy Crisis,” *Catholic Theology and Thought* 76 (2015): 83–117.

From Ireland, Suzanne Mulligan turns to Catholic Social Teaching as an effective resource to restore the frayed social trust in society today and finds in the papacy of Pope Francis, particularly in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, ways of moving to a world of greater social equity.⁸³

In late May, Pope Francis spoke on synodality, reform, and populism. He noted that “synodality is not a reorganization of church structures but rather a path of ecclesial communion that seeks to open minds and hearts to the will of the Holy Spirit.” Recognizing false manifestations of synodality, he urged a “true synodality” and warned that “synodality without communion can become ecclesiastical populism.” He added, “Synodality should lead us to live more intensely ecclesial communion, in which the diversity of charisms, vocations, and ministries are harmoniously integrated, animated by the same baptism, which makes us all sons and daughters.”⁸⁴

Locating the synod within the communion of the people of God rather than within the episcopacy is crucial, because synodality aims to reform the church and, in a particular way, its leadership. Two theologians, the Venezuelan Rafael Luciani and the Italian Serena Noceti, provide a succession of claims that lead to understanding the preeminence of the people of God. Their first premise is that “what is permanent is the people of God, what is transitory is the hierarchical service.”⁸⁵ From there they argue that “the renewal of the ecclesial hierarchy does not in itself produce transformation.”⁸⁶ The hierarchy needs to be reformed not by itself but by the church. They argue that the synod has to be collegial, that we enter communion by a new way of being related to each other, where “the people of God is the totality of the church.”⁸⁷ They advocate therefore a collegial synodality rather than a hierarchical one and see the ecclesiology as synodal.

Nathalie Becquart, the Under-Secretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, makes a similar argument when she holds that we can respond to and reform clericalism by “sharing ministry” in the church.⁸⁸ She argues that reform of the clergy and the hierarchy can only be addressed by the whole people of God in the service of all. For her, the key to combatting the toxic cultures within church leadership is the

83. Suzanne Mulligan, “‘Builders of a New Social Bond’: *Fratelli Tutti* on Good Politics and the Challenge of Inequality,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 80, no. 4 (September 2021): 1173–1203, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12421>. See a similar insight in Stephen J. Pope, “Integral Human Development: From Paternalism to Accompaniment,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2019): 123–47.

84. Junno Arocho Esteves, “Synodality Means Communion, Not ‘Populism,’ Pope Says,” *Crux*, May 26, 2022, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2022/05/synodality-means-communion-not-populism-pope-says/>.

85. Rafael Luciani and Serena Noceti, “Advancing the Reception of the Council: Episcopal Collegiality, Collegial Synodality, Synodal Ecclesiality,” in Conway, Duffy, and McDaid, *The Synodal Pathway*, 51–61 at 52.

86. Luciani and Noceti, “Advancing the Reception,” 54.

87. Luciani and Noceti, “Advancing the Reception,” 56.

88. Nathalie Becquart, “Synodality: Toward a Renewal of Ministry,” in Conway, Duffy, and McDaid, *The Synodal Pathway*, 62–78.

notion of servant leadership, a form of leadership that protects the synodal process, the people of God, and, indeed, the hierarchy as well. Herein the social trust of the church can be restored and furthered not only by reforming the church leadership that has alienated so many, as we saw above, but also by establishing a church of hospitality that welcomes through servant leadership. Marinella Perroni holds similar positions. She sees a collegial decisional power emerging from the synodal process and discusses how the style of leadership very much needs to be collegial and servant, appreciating both equity and hospitality.⁸⁹ She invokes both Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and Pope Francis as embodying a receptive form of leadership known more for its vulnerability rather than dominance.

The synodal church above all allows itself to be reformed by the Holy Spirit operating through repetitive practices of gathering in communion, where through shared discourse we learn to let the Spirit speak and articulate who we are called to be as church. This is, after all, what we understand from the Acts of the Apostles, where the disciples constantly gathered together in the Upper Room. There, from the Last Supper onwards, the disciples first returned to grieve over the death of Jesus and in the sharing of their grief, received the Holy Spirit, who then led them to evangelize. As part of their evangelization, they found themselves led by the Spirit not only to the people of Israel but beyond to the Gentiles as well. In Acts 15, the church was able to gather to listen, to discern, and to decide how to go forward with and in the Spirit. Acts 15 is the founding experience of the synodal church, where communal, synodal discernment was first practiced by expressing the movement of the Spirit.⁹⁰

The Dutch Jesuit Jos Moons, who has argued for a renewed understanding of the Holy Spirit,⁹¹ writes that “synodality recontextualizes the bishop’s responsibility by situating it within the community of the faithful. In addition, as the Holy Spirit is the main actor in the synodal process, all the faithful, including bishops, have to listen to what He is saying, a task that requires discerning the spirits.”⁹² In *The Synodal Pathway* he argues, “Now walking this path of synodality is not a goal in itself; the objective is to follow the Spirit’s promptings. It is therefore a crucial question how the Spirit’s ‘voice’ can be heard, all the more so as usually a variety of viewpoints claim to result from listening to the Spirit.”⁹³ He argues that synodality fails fundamentally whenever

89. Marinella Perroni, “La Synodalita nella chiesa: Una questione di ieri e di oggi.” Delivered at Il sogno europeo di un cardinale: Carlo Maria Martini, l’Europa e la Chiesa (University of Milano-Bicocca, November 7, 2022).

90. James F. Keenan, “Moral Discernment in History,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 668–79; Jessie Rogers, “‘It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us’: Synodality and Discernment in Acts 15,” in Conway, Duffy, and McDaid, *The Synodal Pathway*, 91–100.

91. Jos Moons, *The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Pneumatological Renewal: Mystici Corporis, Lumen Gentium and Beyond* (New York: Brill, 2022).

92. Jos Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.18290/rt22692.5>.

93. Jos Moons, “Synodality, the Holy Spirit, and Discernment of Spirits,” in Conway, Duffy, and McDaid, *The Synodal Pathway*, 79–90 at 80.

it fails to hear the promptings of the Spirit. He argues that there are two basic mindsets that need to be changed if we are to be properly disposed to the Spirit: “Firstly, it requires a culture change in the church in relation to obedience and ‘following the party line.’ Without a more positive approach to criticism, dialogue and questions, synodality simply cannot exist. Secondly, for synodality in its richest possible form, a greater inclusion of the laity is required.”⁹⁴

But he adds that synodality has its theological roots,

the first of which consists in the reality and priority of the Spirit’s role. The Spirit is not merely the instrument of Christ or the hierarchy but plays “his own” active role. Moreover, theologically speaking that role has priority over the hierarchy’s leadership role. As it is therefore *ultimately* the Spirit who leads the Church, not the hierarchy, this means practically speaking that all are called to listen to what the Spirit is saying. The hierarchy’s role in taking decisions must be situated and lived in the context of the Spirit’s leadership role and it entails facilitating the listening process.

The second root is

the baptismal dignity of the faithful. It implies that the Spirit dwells and works in all the faithful, who constitute together the people of God (*Lumen gentium*, 9–12). The Spirit has not only been given to the bishops—hence, collegiality—but to all the faithful. Here, the old distinction between a hierarchical teaching church and a lay learning church (*ecclesia docens*, *ecclesia discens*) has been surpassed. Once again, this does not mean that the hierarchy’s role is abolished, but recontextualized: the ordained ministers can only discern the Spirit if they have first contemplated the Spirit’s (possible) work in the people as a whole.⁹⁵

Here Moons keeps us from thinking that the church functions with bishops speaking and laity listening, of bishops leading and laity following, the very reductive situation that contemporary theologians continually decry and that Legrand identifies as an aberration. Rather, the trust in synodality will be whether we trust one another to listen through synodality to the Spirit. Here the church offers a modality for growing in trust and wisdom, the very modality that founded the church at Pentecost. This I think captures how confounding it was for many Catholics in the United States when they heard of the bishops’ recent elections: These elections gave no indication that they were listening to the pope, or to his urging to pursue synodality, or, therefore, to the Spirit. They seemed like they were only listening to themselves. What the bishops need to recognize is that we, like the Spirit, have great expectations of them. Were they to hear what we hear, perhaps they might find themselves listening to the Bishop of Rome’s summons to synodality.

Finally, Moons’s third root for synodality is that

94. Moons, “Synodality,” 82.

95. Moons, “Synodality,” 83.

the Spirit leads the church, which He does by means of ministries and charisms (*Lumen gentium*, 12). Historically, therefore, the church is an eschatological reality: she is a pilgrim people on a journey, constantly trying to reflect Christ's light and to be led by the Spirit. In more concrete terms, that involves conversion, reform, and discerning the signs of the times. Synodality is a means to bring alive the theoretical idea of a pilgrim church.⁹⁶

Moons turns to synodality as a form of discerning the Spirit through a "dialogical way of proceeding."⁹⁷

For the past four years, I have argued that what the church most needs to do is to reform its episcopacy. Ironically, the resistance by the hierarchy to the synodal model is an indication of how urgent that reform is. But similarly, the ways that some bishops have participated in synodality in hierarchical ways have made the call to their reform even more urgent.

Yet what is at stake in the Catholic Church today is precisely social trust. Our bishops have compromised the church and its members both by their participation in and their response to the sexual abuse crisis and by the ways, as Wuthnow and Dionne note, they have weaponized distrust, including their support of populist leaders and their failure to recognize the papacy of Francis. This trust can be restored if the church returns to its original way of proceeding as synodal. Now we need our bishops to be brothers to the Bishop of Rome, but we also need to see them listening, to us, as we await the Spirit who prompts us to follow her.⁹⁸

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96. Moons, "Synodality," 83. For the need of both Christ and the Spirit, see John Zizioulas's wonderful essay "Christ, the Spirit and the Church," in *Being as Communion* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 123–42.

97. Moons, "Synodality," 88.

98. I dedicate this article to the memory of Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, the only black Catholic female health-care ethicist in the United States, who embodied a way of promoting dialogue by the way she let the Spirit speak through her for equity, mutual vulnerability, mutual recognition, and social trust. Special thanks to my research assistant Samuel Peterson.