

Nationalism

Who Belongs to the Nation-State?



**CONVERSATION
STARTER SERIES**

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Nationalism

The definition of nationalism seems neutral enough at first read. Merriam Webster defines it as “loyalty and devotion to a nation...or a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests.” The term can be differentiated into two categories: civic nationalism and identity-based nationalism. While the former might be understood as something akin to patriotism, the latter can be more insidious, threatening harmony through exclusion and inequality. Nationalism requires defining who belongs and who does not, and can involve pitting one group against another. Nationalism might entail xenophobia and prejudice, and both have seen a global resurgence in recent years. Class conflict, racism, rising levels of migration, and economic and social insecurity can catalyze this more dangerous strain of nationalism.

Nationalism has often been rooted in scapegoating, the need to blame other groups for contemporary crises. In America, it has deepened racial, economic, and religious divides. Early in the twentieth century, U.S. laws banned immigration from certain countries; today, waves of immigrants are blamed for “stealing” the jobs of native-born Americans. Recent attacks, like the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the mass shooting in El Paso, reveal the violence made possible by the most extreme of nationalists, and history tells us just how deadly the effects of extreme nationalist sensibilities can be.

But nationalism is hardly an American trend. In “Sound Familiar?” Rand Richards Cooper traces the appearance of contemporary nationalism in Europe. From backlash in Germany in response to the Merkel administration’s immigration policies to the formation of militia groups in refugee neighborhoods in Finland, a resurgence of ethno-nationalist energy has resulted in nativist demonstrations, parades, and activism. Anti-immigrant ads and rhetoric often cater to Germans who feel “left behind”—a striking similarity to the rhetoric that led to Donald Trump’s election.

In “When the Faithful Vote from Fear,” Paul Moses focuses on Italian politics and the country’s nationalist parties, Lega Nord and the Five Star Movement. Moses tracks the way their rhetoric contradicts Pope Francis’s remarks on the misplaced fear of immigrants: “Our age is marked by great fear in the face of globalization. And fears often focus on those who are foreigners, different from us, poor, as if they were an enemy.”

In “The Gods of Nation & Blood,” Joseph S. Flipper writes about Henri de Lubac’s efforts to guide the church’s response to anti-Semitic racism in German-controlled France. De Lubac saw his spiritual resistance against Nazi ideology to be part of his vocation, inextricable from what it means to be a Christian. Racism is not just sin, it’s heresy, Flipper concludes. “Passivity in the face of ethno-nationalism,” he writes, “is a danger for today’s church as it was for the French church of the 1940s.”

In “Shrine Politics,” Santiago Ramos writes about the co-opting of religion by nationalist movements. In France, for instance, Marine Le Pen spoke on the imperative of respecting France’s Catholic roots, and even

the centrist Emmanuel Macron acknowledged a need to repair fractured relations between church and state. But as Ramos writes, such gestures are usually more concerned with political control than piety: "Religious symbols are being mixed with secular power for the benefit of the latter. Politicians wring the last bits of memory and meaning from religious traditions in order to secure votes." The same is true outside the West, as India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) mixes Hindu nationalism and entrenched notions of religious nativism to exclude "outsiders" from national identity.

As Catholics, how might we understand nationalism's potential for a healthy patriotism without falling prey to its ugliest aspects? Is this possible? The church has not stayed silent on the dangers of exclusionary nationalism, particularly when it threatens our duty to welcome the stranger. We must hold each other accountable by working toward a society that treats everyone with dignity, regardless of citizenship or identity.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION

Rand Richards Cooper, "Sound Familiar?" February 2018

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sound-familiar>)

Paul Moses, "When the Faithful Vote from Fear," March 2018

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/when-faithful-vote-fear>)

Joseph S. Flipper, "The Gods of Nation & Blood," September 2018

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/gods-nation-blood>)

Santiago Ramos, "Shrine Politics," August 2018

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/shrine-politics>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the common themes you see among nationalist movements throughout the world? What economic, political, and social trends have exacerbated these movements?
2. Consider the classification of racism as “heresy.” What is racism and why is it wrong? What commandments do we break? How does racism change our relationship with our neighbor, and how does it harm our individual and communal relationships with God?
3. How has nationalism (in any form) manifested in your local community, if at all? What are some of the causes of these attitudes?
4. Have you seen nationalism play out in your church or religious communities? How much should civic nationalism be incorporated into liturgy (i.e. singing patriotic songs during Mass on Independence Day)?
5. What can Catholics contribute to the imperative against nationalism? What do you think the church *should* be doing? How are Christian symbols used for political ends, and how can we counteract this misuse?
6. How have Catholics been complicit in anti-Semitism, the oppression of African Americans, and other forms of racism throughout its history? How can we address these past injustices to prevent future ones?
7. Properly understood and expressed, can nationalism be a positive force? Is exclusion inherently wrong? Is it always wrong to exclude based on some identities—race, sex, gender, national origin, religion—or is it acceptable in some cases? (See Isaac Chotiner in “Further Reading.”) What are some alternatives to nationalism that still encourage community among people?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Adam Serwer, "The Nationalist's Delusion," *The Atlantic*:

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-nationalists-delusion/546356>)

Monica Kim, "The Everyday Psychology of Nationalism," *The Atlantic*:

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/the-everyday-psychology-of-nationalism/284188>)

Hannah Gais, "White Nationalism's New Clothes," *The Baffler*:

(<https://thebaffler.com/this-american-carnage/white-nationalisms-new-clothes-gais>)

David M. Kotz, "The Specter of Right-Wing Nationalism," *Jacobin*:

(<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/donald-trump-neoliberalism-right-wing-nationalism>)

Isaac Chotiner, "How Liberals Can Use Nationalism for Good," *The New Yorker*:

(<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-liberals-can-use-nationalism-for-good>)

Sound Familiar?

Trump & Nationalism, Here & Abroad

— Rand Richard Cooper

Even amid the spectacular information glut that is life today, provincialism remains the normal human attitude, and perhaps especially for citizens of the world's superpower. American exceptionalism is not merely a matter of regarding our national character and moral standing as unique, but our history and politics as well. Thus we instinctively tend to view the election of Donald Trump as an entirely homegrown phenomenon. For Never-Trumpers the president is our own bad American karma, a crass capture of politics by our entertainment culture; for Ever-Trumpers, he's our brash American tycoon-hero, and possibly our rescuer.

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But it's worth keeping in mind the larger, global picture, in which Trump figures as emblematic of a particular historical-political moment—and movement. His election parallels an upsurge in populist nationalism across any number of countries, expressed in resurgent national pride, anti-immigrant animus, a preference for bellicose and authoritarian leadership styles, and what Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol calls the increasing prevalence of "raw nativism."

I've written before about the German backlash against the generous immigration policies of the Merkel government, and how it has spurred right-wing activism, most notably in the rise of *Alternativ für Deutschland*, the party that captured 13 percent of the popular vote in elections last September, placing ninety-four representatives in the Bundestag—the first rightist party

to do so since Hitler's. My German friends reassure me that the AfD will be marginalized and ignored, and certainly never invited into governance. That may be. But it has already created havoc; the presence within the German polity of an undigestible 13 percent has stymied the metabolism of governance, vastly complicating the task of forming a governing coalition. And what happens if the AfD goes to 20 percent? At some point, some other party will have to partner with them.

The situation in Germany merits a closer look. A front-page article in the *New York Times* profiles a forty-eight-year-old coal miner named Guido Reil, an ex-trade unionist and longtime Social Democratic Party voter who now follows what the writer calls "the new siren call of the far right." The article notes that the prospect of a far-right party drawing votes from a traditional bastion of the left "goes directly to the heart of the emerging threat the AfD presents to Germany's political establishment." Significantly, Guido Reil lives in the Ruhr, a depressed industrial region in Germany's heartland, where mines have closed, industry has moved away and economic stagnation has set in—and with it, widespread political disaffection. The article tells how one AfD representative boasted in the Bundestag of his party as "a new people's party that cares about the little people;" when SPD lawmakers guffawed in derision, he pointed at TV cameras and warned, "Go ahead and laugh, your voters are watching."

The AfD appeals to what the *Times* calls "Germany's left-behinds," and does so by taking a hard line on immigration. The idea is that the German welfare state is worth saving—for Germans and Germans only. Immigrants, in this view, are an insidious presence draining away benefits from Germans. "You need to manage who is coming into your country," an AfD representative in Berlin comments. "Open borders and the welfare state don't go together." Two leading female members of AfD, meanwhile, recently achieved

notoriety with a Twitter rant about “barbaric, Muslim, rapist hordes of men.” And German progressives remain torn between those who advocate shunning the right wing, because of such racist comments, and others, the *Times* reports, who “warn that the reflex to ostracize the AfD could backfire.”

Does all of this sound familiar? With a few name and place changes, it could have been written about the appeal of Trump in, say, West Virginia—and the dilemmas that U.S. liberals and the Democratic party face in trying to comprehend and counter it.

The anti-immigrant energies apparent in Germany have surged forth in nations across Europe. In Finland, militia groups vowing to protect Finnish women patrol neighborhoods where refugees are housed; in Italy, regional governments have tried to forbid the construction of mosques; in Denmark, the government proposed confiscating the valuables of refugees to help defray the cost of housing them; and in many countries—even Sweden—gangs have plotted and conducted attacks on refugees. When Swedes engage in xenophobic violence, you *know* Europe is in trouble.

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The recrudescence of nationalism and nativism has occurred not just among Europe’s citizenries, but is also reflected in leadership and in legislation. In Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, authoritarian populists have used inflammatory demagoguery to undermine democratic institutions and practices. In Austria, the

rightist Freedom Party—founded in the 1950s by former Nazis—received a solid 20 percent of the vote in October’s elections, and now a far-right/center-right coalition governs with a 60 percent supermajority. The first time the FPP did well at the polls, almost twenty years ago, it was treated as a pariah, but not this time; as *The Guardian* has reported, the party’s leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, has worked “to soften the neo-Nazi image, [while] articulating an Islamophobia widely shared in parts of Austria.”

In Italy, meanwhile—whose longest serving prime minister since Mussolini is that most Trump-like of European leaders, Silvio Berlusconi—anger against migrants has exploded in violence. Last week a far-right extremist went on a shooting rampage, wounding six African migrants before driving off with an Italian flag wrapped around his neck, his arm raised in a Fascist salute, while screaming “Italy for Italians!” The suspect, it turns out, is a former municipal candidate of a rightist party, the Northern League—currently allied with Berlusconi’s party—whose platform plays to anti-immigrant sentiment, and whose leader, an inflammatory young nationalist named Matteo Salvini, argues that “unchecked immigration brings chaos, anger... drug dealing, thefts, rapes and violence.”

Italy holds national general elections next month, and is heading toward them in an atmosphere of mistrust fueled by what the governing Democratic Party, as the *Times* reports in a fascinating article, considers “a destabilizing campaign of fake news and propaganda... a misinformation campaign that they believe is devised to damage one of the last major center-left governments standing in Europe.” PD (Democratic Party) leaders have complained about the website of yet another right-leaning populist party, The Five Star Movement, which recently placed misleading captions on a photo of a government minister at a funeral, making it seem as if she were mourning a notorious Mafia boss. Some fear that the Northern League and

Salvini could join together with the Five Star Movement, linking and amplifying their anti-immigrant, anti-European Union messages. "Together," the *Times* reports, "they would be an anti-establishment nightmare."

So that's the picture from Europe. Anti-establishment upheavals. Shifting political alliances and party re-configurations. Populist demagogues stirring nativist anger against immigrants while invoking visions of racial purification. All this, even as right-wing skinheads carry torches through American college towns while chanting "Hail Trump"—and Trump himself issues ugly put-downs of black nations while urging immigration from Norway, dream nation of Nazi race mythology.

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"Does putting Trump in this context make him less unsettling, or more? I'm not sure. But it's clear that what's going on here and in Europe reflect the spread of the same virus."

same virus. Matteo Salvini's anti-immigrant campaign and the nativist sentiments it has stirred up forced the Italian government to drop a proposed law granting citizenship to immigrant children born and brought up in Italy. And recently a regional Northern League candidate insisted, on a radio program, that the country has to stem the tide of migrant arrivals because it is endangering "the white race."

Sound familiar? Maybe next they'll call for *un bel muro*—a beautiful wall.

When the Faithful Vote From Fear

The Church Faces Italy's Anti-Immigrant Movement

— Paul Moses

Steve Bannon may be on the way to getting his electoral Dream Team in Italy, a coalition of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and the anti-immigrant League. That is no cause for celebration among Catholic Church leaders, who are somberly facing up to the fact that the faithful have helped elect a governing coalition united by opposition to immigrants, whose welfare is one of Pope Francis's greatest concerns.

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Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, was more blunt than most about it. "In addition to defeating the Democratic Party, I speak in some way of defeat of the church," he said in an interview with *L'Espresso*. "There is a Catholic vote that went to the League or M5S," the acronym for the Five Star Movement. "I do not say that they should be excommunicated, but the church's message did not have relevance to them." The League, he added, "was more reassuring" for these voters than the church was. (Polls showed that Catholics who go to Mass weekly voted in substantial numbers for the League or the Five Star Movement, but were less likely than the overall

electorate to do so.)

De Lubac knew that being a witness to the truth was dangerous and could lead to martyrdom. One day, returning to Lyon on a trip, de Lubac was informed by an anonymous source that there were orders from the Gestapo for his arrest. "I was able to leave again in time," he wrote, "without even passing through the house, thereby just barely escaping the net that shortly after picked up Louis Richard [a Sulpician priest and theologian] at the university seminary in order to deport him." Under threat of arrest, de Lubac stayed in various religious houses, carrying in a satchel stacks of notecards that would later be organized into books.

The Sant'Egidio community, a lay movement based in Rome, has played an important role in promoting Pope Francis's work in behalf of immigrants. But I had the sense in a visit to Rome over the past three weeks that the Italian bishops were playing catch-up following the results of the March 4 election. Still, there was an immediate recognition among them as a group that the church has a problem if practicing Catholics are voting based on antipathy for immigrants. The collective reaction from U.S. bishops to the election of an anti-immigrant president and Congress was more mixed.

At a March 21 meeting, the Permanent Council of the Italian bishops' conference decided to send a letter about welcoming immigrants to be read in all parishes "to help communities pass from fear to encounter, from encounter to relationship, from relationship to interaction and integration."

In responding to reporters' questions afterward, the secretary-general of the bishops' conference appeared to offer his own take on the remarks Riccardi had made earlier, which were headlined in *L'Espresso*: "If Catholics voted for M5S and the League, it means the church has lost." Bishop Nunzio Galantino told reporters that since he wasn't a candidate, he wasn't defeated. "The church was not defeated" in

the election, he added, because Pope Francis's talk of welcoming immigrants is based on the Bible and evangelization—in other words, not on politics.

Nonetheless, Galantino acknowledged that “the bishops have had to take note of an insufficient preparation and even political sensitivity that has been revealed.” This will require a return to emphasizing religious formation, he said.

The governing coalition still isn't fully formed—legislative leaders were picked, but the prime minister has not been chosen. So far, Matteo Salvini, the Donald Trump-friendly, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim leader of the League seems to be grabbing more influence than his party's 17 percent share of the vote would

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justify. He's accomplished that through negotiation with Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Five Star Movement, top vote-getter at 33 percent. There are obvious differences between their parties; their economics go in opposite directions. Di Maio ran on a promise to create a guaranteed national income, which drew

votes in impoverished southern Italy, a region that the League, previously named the Northern League, had scorned as a home to loafers. Based in the wealthier, industrialized north, the League backs a flat tax. (Bannon has said he favors Salvini, whom he reportedly met with on March 8.)

Meanwhile, without direct reference to Italian politics, Pope Francis has continued to decry the fear of immigrants, the driving force in the election. Comments he made at a ceremony to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Community of Sant'Egidio, spoken to a crowd gathered in front of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere on a chilly, rainy Sunday afternoon on March 11, have to be seen in that context:

The world today is often inhabited by fear—also by anger which is the sister of fear, as Professor Riccardi said. It is an ancient disease: in the Bible the invitation not to be afraid is often repeated. Our age is marked by great fear in the face of globalization. And fears often focus on those who are foreigners, different from us, poor, as if they were an enemy. Nations' development plans are also driven by opposition to these people. And thus we defend ourselves from these people, believing we are preserving what we have or what we are.

The Italian bishops' grim outlook on the election surfaced in remarks from Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti,

president of the bishops' conference. He quoted former Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, a founder of the Christian Democratic Party and an advocate of what eventually became the European Union, who said after the 1953 election, "In this harsh campaign, too many preached hate...but the Italian people need fraternity and love."

On a cool, damp first day of spring, Bassetti offered gloomy observations about a continuing winter that was "not just meteorological"—a "winter that is expressed in the fear of the different: a fear that often scapegoats the immigrant."

The Gods of Nation and Blood

Henri De Lubac and the Heresy of Racism

— Joseph S. Flipper

About a year ago, a man from San Antonio sent me a short letter. "Back in the summer of 1982, I was sent to Lyon, France, as punishment for what had been a tumultuous freshman year at a Jesuit high school, after which I was asked not to return (incidentally, not because of grades)," he wrote. "I was to spend thirty-five days doing the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola with a family friend, Fr. Henri de Lubac. 'Fr. Henri' and I had a wonderful time and he helped me out a lot. We talked about his time in the French resistance in WWII, among other things." What a punishment! "Fr. Henri," or Henri de Lubac, SJ (1896–1991), was one of the preeminent Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. In 1983, one year after my correspondent's encounter with de Lubac, Pope John Paul II would make him a cardinal

deacon, a largely honorary position, recognizing his vast theological contributions and holiness of life. It is fitting that de Lubac guided this man to discover God's will during his difficult youth. Spiritual discernment and spiritual resistance were characteristic of de Lubac's Jesuit vocation and personal mission.

Four decades earlier, de Lubac was involved in the effort to guide the church's response to anti-Semitic racism in German-controlled France. In 1940 Germany invaded the north of France and exercised de facto authority over the Vichy government in southern France. De Lubac had been assigned to Lyon, a center of the French resistance against Nazism in the Vichy-controlled *zone libre*. It became a refuge for exiles from German-occupied Paris—artists, Communists, intellectuals, and everyday people caught up in the war—who from there fought back against Nazism. From 1940 to

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1944, the dark years of German occupation, de Lubac became a figure in the "spiritual resistance." He was part of a loose network of Catholic lay people, bishops, and priests who risked everything to guide the church during this crisis. Spiritual resistance was the name given to these unarmed efforts—prayer, preaching, organizing, and writing—to resist Nazi ideology, but spiritual did not mean it was passive. De Lubac did not think of resistance as primarily a political activity extraneous to Christian identity. Instead, he saw it as a spiritual activity coextensive with the vocation of the Christian Church and inextricable from what it means to be a Christian.

The theological foundations for de Lubac's anti-racism

were outlined in his 1938 book *Catholicism*. There he argued that God sought to heal the divisions among the human race caused by sin and to regather human beings into a true unity. The church is the *communio sanctorum*, both the means to the unity of the human race and the visible sign of that unity, albeit incomplete this side of eternity. Racism, therefore, is not merely a moral failure. It strikes at the foundation of Christian doctrine.

Early on in the German occupation, de Lubac spoke out openly against Nazism. A series of lectures at the Catholic University of Lyon in 1940 gave de Lubac “an opportunity to attack racism,” drawing from the Christian notion of a common human origin and a common human destiny. In these lectures, de Lubac interpreted Nazism religiously and theologically as *anti-Christian at its very root*. For de Lubac, anti-Semitism is fundamentally theological, for its chief characteristic is the rejection of the God of the Jews and of the Bible. The hatred toward Judaism found in atheist humanism—Auguste Comte, Action Française, Louis Ménard, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Alfred Rosenberg—is principally an attack on the idea of God: “What it blames [Judaism] for, then, is what is most incontestable as well as most spiritual in the Bible”—that, is for “its very transcendence.” European anti-Semites did not reject God’s favor toward a particular people, the Jews. They rejected a God who dispelled the ancient myths and who transcends the universe. They desired a return to the gods of nation and blood. “When we speak of ‘neopaganism,’ that is not a polemical expression,” he explained: “In a renewed form, it is indeed the ancient pagan ideal that is waking to reject Christ.” This amounted to “nothing less than the definitive apostasy of Europe.” Reflecting on those lectures, he wrote, “In my naïveté, I still believed at that time that I was expressing the common sentiment of a very large part, if not all, of French Catholicism. I will

also admit that if I had been able to foresee in concrete terms what was going to take place in the course of the following four years, I too would have undoubtedly been afraid and ‘given way by a timid flight.’”

When de Lubac’s open opposition to anti-Semitism became more dangerous, he turned to publishing underground journals, including *Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien*. The clandestine literature published during the occupation was referred to as *témoignage* (witness). *Témoignage* was not seen as merely an account of events but as an intentional, active participation in the events described, as a testimony to the truth silenced by the Vichy and German authorities.

The church’s response to racism and anti-Semitism

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during those dark years was tepid. The Catholic clergy had been initially passive in response to the denaturalization law of 1940, which revoked the French citizenship of Jews, and the anti-Semitic statutes of October 1940, which mobilized Vichy-controlled France to find and expel foreign-born Jews. In a letter dated April 25, 1941, de Lubac wrote to his superiors in the Jesuit order to convince them to act. He claimed that Hitler’s war was first of all an “anti-Christian revolution” and the “brutal return” to neopaganism. In addition to underscoring this unfolding human calamity and the appearance of concentration camps in France, he described a slow imposition of the “cult of the state” leading to a “collective apostasy.”

The occupiers were waging an anti-Semitic propaganda campaign aimed at influencing lay Catholics, while also attempting to dissuade religious superiors and bishops from speaking out. Religious leaders were pressured

to avoid “political Catholicism”—that is, inserting the church into the political sphere. De Lubac accused the French church, particularly the clergy, of passively accepting the anti-Semitism of the Vichy government. This is why de Lubac presented anti-Semitism as an essentially religious problem. “The anti-Semitism of today was unknown to our fathers; besides its degrading effect on those who abandon themselves to it, it is anti-Christian,” he wrote. “It is against the Bible, against the Gospel as well as the Old Testament.” De Lubac firmly set his plea to resist anti-Semitism within the Christian’s baptismal call to resist the “tricks of the adversary.” For de Lubac, the war was not merely political; it was a war for the soul of the French church.

On June 2, 1941, the Vichy government passed a new series of anti-Semitic statutes that restricted the number of Jews in certain professions and prohibited their employment in public service. In addition, it expanded the racial definition of Jew, making a greater number of people subject to the statutes. De Lubac drafted the *Chaine Declaration* with Abbé Joseph Chaine, Louis Richard, and Joseph Bonsirven, SJ, openly opposing the statutes on legal and theological grounds. First, they argued, the statutes overturned the legal precedent in France to avoid discrimination on the basis of religion. Second, the statutes embodied a denial of God’s calling of the Jewish people and God’s blessing of them. For the writers of the *Chaine Declaration*, the integrity of the church was at stake: “the blessing promised to Abraham’s descendants is still upon them.” They disseminated the Declaration on June 16. The force of their arguments prompted the French Assembly of Cardinals and Archbishops to issue their own declaration of opposition to the statutes on July 24. The statements were clear and public warnings by the French clergy prohibiting the use of baptismal and marriage records in the identification of Jews.

De Lubac had a vivid sense that this political struggle

was part of the struggle between good and evil. In 1941, he audaciously gave a lecture at the *École des cadres d’Uriage*, a school near Grenoble founded by the Vichy government. De Lubac interpreted the occupation as a spiritual crisis:

Man is isolated, uprooted, ‘disconcerted.’ He is asphyxiated: it is as if emptiness had been formed in him by an air pump.... There is, at the innermost part of his consciousness, a metaphysical despair. It was of this hunger and this thirst that the prophet Amos once spoke: absolute hunger and thirst. Hunger and thirst that, in many cases, do not even know themselves to be such but that leave on the deepest palate a taste of death.... [S]ubstitute faiths fill this tragic void.... Inevitably something like a great call for air is produced in his inner void, which opens him to the invasion of new positive forces, whatever they might be.

The moral and spiritual void in France left the French susceptible to the invasion of dangerous new faiths—and active collaboration with Hitler after his invasion of their country. For decades prior to the rise of Nazism, French Catholicism had been co-opted by a nationalist ideology. *Action Française*, a nationalist party that repudiated the French revolutionary legacy

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and sought a return to monarchy and social hierarchy, leveraged popular resentment toward French *laïcité* and captured the allegiance of the majority of French Catholics from 1910 to 1920. Charles Maurras, a principal figure in *Action Française*, though he was agnostic, sought the restoration of the monarchy and of Catholicism as a state religion. Maurras was for most of his life an agnostic who believed that Catholicism was necessary for social order in a unity of state,

culture, and race—a unity that he called *intégrisme*. In 1926 Pope Pius XI condemned Action Française for making religion merely a means to political ends. But by then the hearts of many French Catholics had already been prepared for ethno-nationalism.

Passivity in the face of ethno-nationalism is a danger for today's church as it was for the French church of the 1940s. Though in immensely different circumstances, we live under a campaign of dehumanization and are caught up in the political mechanisms of imprisonment and death. Like Charles Maurras, former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon (who happens to be Catholic) has become the spokesman for a religious nationalism that preserves a shared culture, religion, and race. In his 2014 remarks to the Human Dignity Institute's conference at the Vatican, Bannon explained that the West must recover its religious vision to overcome its present and future challenges. With regard to Islam, he explained, "our forefathers...did the right thing. I think they kept it out of the world, whether it was at Vienna, or Tours, or other places.... It bequeathed to us the great institution that is the church of the West." However, when Bannon speaks of saving the religious vision of the Christian West, he is not speaking of God or of personal conversion, but instead of the recovery of an *ethnos*, a people, and its Christian religious heritage. His is a vision that borrows from the Christian faith while falsifying it. Despite Bannon's departure from the White House, his ethno-nationalist vision has been preserved in ideology and policy.

The ascendancy of this vision, along with concurrent growth of white supremacist groups in the United States, requires discernment and action from the church. But racism has often been subject to misdiagnosis among Catholics. In response to last summer's "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, at

which one person was killed and nineteen injured, some bishops initially framed the problem as a political one, over which there may be many opinions. As the facts in Charlottesville became better understood, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston rightly named the problem—"the evil of racism, white supremacy and neo-Nazism"—and called the church to "stand against every form of oppression." Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia, however, provided the better diagnosis: "Racism is a poison of the soul. It's the ugly, original sin of our country, an illness that has never fully healed." He ended on a pessimistic, though perhaps more realistic, note: "We need to start today

"Theologically understood, racism is more than a sin. It constitutes a heresy that undermines the very identity of the church."

with a conversion in our own hearts, and an insistence on the same in others. That may sound simple. But the history of our nation and its tortured attitudes toward race proves exactly the opposite." In the wake of Charlottesville, the USCCB formed an ad hoc committee against racism that is working to discern a response to racism in the American context.

Theologically understood, racism is more than a sin. It constitutes a heresy that undermines the very identity of the church. Taking form in ideology and systemic exclusion, racism threatens to co-opt Christianity because it offers a powerful anti-Christian narrative about who we are as human beings while invoking Europe's "Christian heritage." We should be alarmed not only at the physical violence racism provokes, but also at the signs of the re-animated gods of nation and blood. As de Lubac recognized in the 1940s, unless the church embodies visibly what its doctrine proclaims it to be—the visible site of the reunification of a humanity divided by sin—it fails to be authentically catholic.

Shrine Politics

When Nationalists Exploit Piety

— Santiago Ramos

There is a scene in Michel Houellebecq's controversial novel *Submission* that should be read by anyone who wishes to make the restoration of religious tradition part of a political project. *Submission* was much discussed when it appeared three years ago because of its provocative political speculation: the story takes place in a fictional near future when the candidate of an Islamic party wins the French presidential election after forming a coalition with the socialists against the right-wing National Front. At its heart, though, the novel is a satire aimed at the spiritual emptiness of the French cultural elite, represented by the novel's protagonist, a literature professor named François.

In the first half of the novel, François visits the medieval shrine of the Black Virgin of Rocamadour in south-central France as part of his half-hearted quest to find meaning in his life. The village of Rocamadour is a soulless tourist trap, centered on gastronomical activities. But there is still some life around the Catholic shrine. François attempts to venerate the Virgin: "Every day I went and sat for a few minutes before the Black Virgin—the same one who for a thousand years inspired so many pilgrimages, before whom so many saints and kings had knelt." But he doesn't have the same experience as those pilgrims. The statue "[bears] witness to a vanished universe" that he longs for but cannot enter. When, for purely pragmatic reasons, François finally converts to Islam, he converts to a religion no more alien to him than Christianity—despite the fact that all his ancestors were Christian.

This passage comes to mind every time I read about a politician from Europe or America trying to make use of the vestigial Christian culture of his or her country.

There have been many such politicians lately. In June, Viktor Orbán of Hungary spoke of turning his country into an "illiberal democracy" with a formally Christian identity: "Unlike liberal politics, Christian politics is able to protect people, our nations, families, our culture rooted in Christianity, and equality between men and women: in other words, our European way of life." In Poland, the ruling party has affirmed the Catholic dimension of Polish identity through official ceremonies which blend church and state. In Italy, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini of the Northern League (formerly a northern separatist party, now populist and nationalist), brandished a rosary and a Bible and spoke about his Catholic roots on the campaign trail during the recent elections. In the United States, politicians toggle between affirming one nation under God, and proclaiming an outright Christian nation—two different things. And of course, there are the never-ending complaints about a "War on Christmas": last December, Donald Trump announced, "We can say 'Merry Christmas' again."

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Some politicians have taken the further step of using the Cross as a political tool. Laymen in Bavaria (Markus Söder of the Christian Union Party) and Italy (Salvini again) have called for crosses to be placed in courthouses, police stations, and other public buildings. Salvini emphasized the desire to place crosses in Italy's ports of entry—"in an elevated and highly visible place"—presumably so that refugees and immigrants of other faiths might learn the religious identity of the country they're entering. Yet Salvini's party traffics in a brand of nationalism that treats Christianity not as a unifying faith but

as a cultural artifact, on the same level as the pre-Christian pagan gods of northern Italy. For most Christians, the Cross is a symbol that a suffering refugee might find solace in, but for Salvini it is a symbol of a national identity that needs to be protected from foreigners.

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Perhaps the most interesting developments are taking place in France, where only the Left appears to be keeping a secular tone that was, until recently, the norm for all politicians. On Pentecost, Marion Maréchal Le Pen of the National Rally (the National Front’s new name) joined a pilgrimage to Chartres, led by Cardinal Robert Sarah, Chief of the Congregation of Divine Worship at the Vatican. Last year, François Fillon, presidential candidate for the center-right Republican party, spoke eloquently about the Catholic roots of France, arguing that they are just as significant to the country’s identity as its Revolution in 1789: “You just heard the bells ringing.... A thousand years of history! How can you not feel the force, the power, the depth of this past that forged us, that gives us the keys to our future?” Even the centrist Emmanuel Macron, paragon of the European liberal establishment, told France’s Catholic bishops in April that “we share in a confused way that relations between the church and state have been damaged and it is up to you, as much as us, to repair them.” In theory at least, *laïcité* remains a bedrock principle of the Fifth Republic. Yet these French politicians all want to tap into the Catholic roots of French identity.

Christians who would like to see more room for religion in public life might be inclined to welcome this trend. They might see it as aligning with the message of Pope Francis, who argues in *Laudato si’* that our political

problems have spiritual dimensions. Or they might see it is the beginning of a new “post-liberal” order grounded in transcendent faith. But these political-religious gestures usually have more to do with rallying the base for a particular party than with renewing faith in the West. Religious symbols are being mixed with secular power for the benefit of the latter. Politicians wring the last bits of memory and meaning from religious traditions in order to secure votes. Those who applaud the religious gestures of populist politicians might find themselves in a position like that of François at Rocamadour: thirsting for the sacred, but feeling more nostalgia than faith. The path to spiritual renewal cannot be made shorter or easier by mass politics. To understand the shrine at Rocamadour as something more than mere patrimony requires discernment and personal illumination. Political rallies cannot produce or preserve this kind of piety; only prayer can.

At least, that is how I feel whenever I contemplate the Catholic country of my birth. In the early 1600s, the Virgin Mary appeared in Ca’acupe, Paraguay. She saved the life of a member of the Guaraní tribe named José, who was fleeing from dangerous rivals from the Mbayá tribe. The Virgin appeared and spoke in the Guaraní language, helping José find a place to hide. Today, a blue and white basilica that rivals St. Peter’s in size rises to the skies from the heart of the city of Ca’acupe. Thousands of pilgrims visit the site every year. Paraguayan flags adorn the altar. The President of Paraguay usually makes an appearance there on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception—a sign of the influence the church still has on Paraguayan society, though that influence shrinks with every passing year.

I have visited Ca’acupe several times, both in school-sponsored trips and by myself as an adult. I have entered the shrine with different feelings: patriotism, sure, but also sadness, awe, curiosity, unsettled questioning. I can’t recall too many moments when

the patriotic element of the shrine felt essential to true devotion. I learned to venerate the shrine through a personal path that was not supported by any political regime I have lived in. Our Lady is a symbol, in the proper metaphysical sense of the word, of the presence of God and of our response to that presence. How to ponder such a notion? How to judge its veracity? Sure, it helps that there's a popular religious culture and community that sustains the shrine. A religious symbol can only be understood with the help of such a community, which interprets it. But that community isn't a nation-state; it's a communion of believers. Moreover, the act of faith in the symbol, the appropriation of the symbol's meaning for one's own life, is ultimately a personal act. What does it matter to me that the

president of Paraguay makes an appearance at the shrine? Citizens of Poland, Hungary, France, and the United States should ask themselves the same question about their presidents and their shrines.

Before he leaves Rocamadour, François comes to a deeper understanding of its shrine. Despite being under the influence of the patriotic verse of Charles Péguy during his trip, François is able to disentangle the nationalist side of popular piety from the transcendence that the Black Virgin represents: "What this severe statue expressed was not attachment to a homeland, to a country.... It was something mysterious, priestly, and royal..." The failure to distinguish between the local and the sacred leads to either disappointment or idolatry.

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