Opinion

NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV speaks to guests assisted by the Albano diocesan Caritas agency during a luncheon at the Borgo Laudato Si' in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, Aug. 17, 2025. The words of the diocesan bishop of Albano, Bishop Vincenzo Viva, captured Michael Sean Winters' attention. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 22, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Leo XIV shared Sunday pranzo with a group of poor people from the Diocese of Albano. The luncheon was held in the gardens of the Castel Gandolfo.

The people invited receive assistance from Caritas Albano. Some were homeless, others live in shelters or are involved with other programs administered by the charitable arm of the Albano Diocese. When then-Cardinal Prevost was named a cardinal-bishop, Albano was the suburban diocese he served as titular bishop. Cardinal Luis Tagle is now the titular bishop of Albano.

The pope spoke to the group and offered grace before the meal. Cardinal Fabio Baggio, undersecretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and director general of the Laudato Si' Center for Advanced Formation, which cosponsored the lunch, also spoke.

It was the words of the diocesan (as opposed to titular) bishop of Albano, Bishop Vincenzo Viva that captured my attention.

"In the faces of those seated at these tables today, we see the beauty of the Gospel made concrete — living testimony of who we are as the Church of Albano," Bishop Viva said. "There is no 'us' and 'them,' no benefactors and beneficiaries: There are only people sharing bread — and with it, their stories, their struggles, and their hopes."

Read this next: At Mass and lunch with the poor, pope says burn with 'fire' of God's love

This speaks, and speaks beautifully, to our Catholic understanding of a communion of persons. That ecclesial understanding, in turn, shapes how the Catholic Church's social teaching views society and culture. The ethics flow from deeper dogmatic beliefs, a point that is too often skipped when teaching Catholic social teaching.

For us, the individual is not isolated or solitary as too often happens in modern, liberal societies. Nor is the individual subsumed by the group, as many post-liberal philosophies and practices do. And, in the mundaneness of the activity, "sharing bread," there is a universal note as well.

Catholic social teaching always evidences a priority for the communal. It was and is a response to the hyper-individualism of late-19th and 20th century liberalism. But liberalism was always saved, at least partially, by its universalism: Before the American Revolution, colonists spoke of their rights as Englishmen. After Jefferson's stirring words in the Declaration of Independence, liberalism understood those rights to be universal, belonging to every human person qua human person, even though we often fail in honoring that understanding.

Liberalism only flourishes when there is a vibrant civil society connecting people with one another. Alexis de Tocqueville noticed this in his famous book *Democracy in America*. If the task of connecting people is left to politics, government will stick its fingers into places it does not belong. Civil society is an antidote to hyper-individualism but it is also a brake on political overreach. Politics really should leave culture alone. (Yes, President Trump: That means you too!)



The U.S. flag flutters in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington Jan. 16, 2025, ahead of the Jan. 20 presidential inauguration of then-U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. (OSV News/Reuters/Marko Djurica)

Post-liberalism is fascinated with the group. The advocates of identity politics and of diversity, equity and inclusion programs are almost always people of decency and compassion, but their anthropology is faulty and inadequate. Herderian ideas about belonging only get one so far: MAGA makes its adherents feel like they belong to a group too. Johann Gottfried von Herder was one of the first, and most brilliant, critics of the Enlightenment, and he invented the idea of belonging as a political concept. I can't point to a post-liberal political regime, however, that is healthy, that is respectful of rights and of human dignity, and that serves the common good in any meaningful way.

Catholic social teaching, instead, does not give priority to the individual over the group, nor of the group over the individual, nor of the whole over all. Its organic understanding of human society sees the individual, the group, and the universal in relationship with one another. These relationships do not permit us to escape tensions between the three. Catholic social teaching helps order society, but it doesn't bring on the eschaton.

Critically, Catholic social teaching also roots the dignity of the person and the call to communion in our understanding of a transcendent God. Without those roots, we will always risk being at the mercy of some demagogue who valorized the individual or the group or the whole in ways that dehumanize. Unless human ambitions and ideas are relativized by the horizon of transcendence, they will oppress. That seems one of history's most obvious lessons.

Advertisement

Liberalism has distorted itself in our day by its embrace of autonomy as the preeminent value in society. It too easily and too often lapses into libertarianism. Post-liberalism has not held onto the achievements of liberalism, but shunned them. Just so, post-liberalism is more likely to be led by reactionary populists like Trump, Viktor Orban and others than it is by well-meaning DEI advocates. In the rough and tumble of politics, *Sturm und Drang* beats affirmation every day of the week.

The most essential pillars of Catholic social teaching are the dignity of every human person and solidarity as the preeminent societal norm, neither the one nor the other alone. Subsidiarity is a means of organizing solidarity and the common good is a means for directing it. These four, taken together and rooted in our transcendent and absconding God, provide the lens through which we Catholics are called to view and critique our society.

Our nation and the whole world desperately need this Catholic vision, this understanding of communion in which, as the good bishop said: "There is no 'us' and 'them,' no benefactors and beneficiaries: There are only people sharing bread — and with it, their stories, their struggles, and their hopes."