

Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice

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A Fragmented World in Search of Spirituality: Freedom and Pluralism from Within the Social Doctrine of the Church

Concept Paper

“You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You” (St. Augustin, Confessions, Book 1, Ch.1)

“The peace that Jesus gives us is not merely the silence of weapons, but the peace that touches and transforms the heart of each one of us!” (Leo XIV, Urbi et Orbi Message 2026)

1. Premise and Background

In the 2025 FCAPP International Conference we focused on **Unity** and **Universalism** as foundations of peaceful coexistence and cohesion in the global and local communities. They represent the necessary antidotes to the present crises characterized by growing polarizations in the economy, society and in international relations and by conflicts of various nature (social, commercial, political, financial, military, environmental, etc.). Those conflicts are leading us to sleepwalk towards the “piecemeal third world war”, of which Pope Francis spoke many times during His pontificate. The discussion at the 2025 Conference pointed out that polarizations have as their root causes secularization (“values and ethics do not matter”) and relativism (“there are no universal values”). Based on the latter, if it is assumed that there are only sectional values, linked to different identities, interests and cultures, it will be impossible to avoid civilization clashes and maintain peace. Our goal was to help strengthen the awareness of the ethical foundations of governance at the global and local level based on dialogue, cooperation and solidarity, and to point out the essential contribution of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) focused on unity and universality.

In the 2026 Conference, we take as a starting point another feature of the present challenges (the “Rerum Novarum” of to-day): the threat of oppression and

repression against individuals and communities by forces in the economy society and international relations that rely on wealth, strength and technology, and aim at creating subordination and dependency. Those threats are underpinned by ideologies that preach the superiority of specific communities, cultures and identities over others. They lead to hegemonic competition, discrimination, polarization and often war, and give rise to new forms of despotic illiberal and totalitarian governance. Religious fundamentalisms are also a manifestation of this worrying trend. The Catholic Church is directly targeted by this worrying trend, due to the many and growing cases of attack and intimidation (there are worldwide 380 million Catholics victims of persecution). But it is also indirectly targeted when such crimes undermine SDC and the values of the Catholic Church, by threatening and victimizing other faith communities, minorities, vulnerable individuals and social groups.

2. Freedom and Pluralism in Catholic Social Thinking

The SDC has always upheld freedom and pluralism, notably religious freedom and pluralism, as foundations of a peaceful coexistence and dialogue among individuals, nations and religions, and bulwarks for the preservation of specific cultures and traditions. It has highlighted the importance of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and at the international level multilateralism and international law. Reference should be made here to the **Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*** by St. John Paul II, which was released in 1991, but had a long gestation period going back to the dramatic experience of the “Church of Silence” under Communist regimes between 1945 and 1989, and also the Catholic resistance to Nazi-Fascism in the interwar period. Today we are witnessing the resurgence of a new wave of intolerance, the growing use of violence in social and political conflicts, and widespread radicalism in opposing and contrasting different ideologies and *Weltanschauung*. After WWII an international “liberal” order had been gradually built based on universal values, human rights, multilateralism and international law. This post-war world order presided over the “liberalization” of trade finance and interstate relations and led to the establishment of international agreements and organizations aimed at the development and practical application of shared legal and value frameworks to international relations. At the same time, democratization, liberation and decolonialization at the domestic level intended to promote independence, peer

relations and equal dignity among the different nations and communities of the world.

However, those mechanisms appear today compromised and much weakened. At the national level, major trends have appeared towards the s.c. “democratic recession” (Larry Diamond), the crisis of democracy (of which Pope Francis spoke at the *Settimane Sociali dei Cattolici Italiani (Catholic Social Weeks)* in Trieste in 2024), and multiple attacks to liberal democracy from the inside and the outside of various communities. At the international level multilateralism and international law have been seriously challenged and undermined both in big and small countries, in the West and the East, the North and the South of the globe. Many commentators therefore think that it would be now unrealistic to go back to the “old international order” of the past, not only because its underlying principles have suffered repeated and widespread violations in recent times, but also because it now appears that those principles were largely ignored eroded and bypassed also in the past, even in the heydays of their liberal magnification. Despotic and illiberal regimes, autocracies and dictatorships are gaining popular support and spreading around the world. They are even proposed and defended as more efficient and stable forms of governance, in relation to the cumbersome procedures of liberal democracy, based on individual freedoms and pluralism.

In reflecting on freedom and multilateralism, renewed attention should be given to the principle of subsidiarity, as articulated in *Quadragesimo Anno* and further developed in *Centesimus Annus, Caritas in Veritate, Evangelii Gaudium and Fratelli Tutti*. Subsidiarity safeguards human dignity by ensuring that higher levels of authority support — rather than displace — the proper responsibilities of persons, families, intermediary institutions and political communities. It affirms that authentic solidarity cannot endure without the vitality of local and mediating bodies, nor can global governance sustain legitimacy if it becomes detached from participation, moral responsibility and cultural rootedness. This balance is particularly important in ensuring that necessary global coordination does not weaken the responsibility and legitimate authority of local and national communities. In an age marked by technological acceleration and expanding administrative capacity, subsidiarity serves as an essential ethical compass, helping to ensure that multilateral cooperation remains ordered to the human person and the common good, while preserving the freedom and agency of peoples.

Worrying trends appear underway. It is necessary and timely therefore to ring the alarm bell and appeal compellingly to the principles of the SDC.

3. The tension between freedom and truth, pluralism and unity

At the heart of the crisis there is the tension between freedom and truth, pluralism and unity. Freedom is rooted in human dignity and conscience, both at the individual and the collective level. Pluralism enables tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of the cultural, political and religious diversity of individuals and societies. It is the precondition for the operation of encounter and dialogue, and the natural terrain for exercising moral discernment and leaning on conscience.

Freedom, however, is ordered to truth and the common good. Unity means communion not uniformity. That is why freedom is constrained by ethics and “must be exercised in solidarity” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*). “Truth is not mine or yours, but to be yours and mine” (St. Augustin). The “concrete living” operates through polarities, whereas it is stifled by polarizations (Romano Guardini). The tensions between freedom and truth, between pluralism and solidarity reveal the inherent complementarity of the two. The resulting ethical dilemmas must be addressed by conscience and responsibility, making life more complex and challenging, but also more human and more solidary (St. John Henry Newman).

At a time of technological acceleration, geopolitical upheaval and moral confusion, spirituality is called upon to recover authentic discernment. Spirituality enables to distinguish between what upholds human dignity and what merely increases power and wealth. True discernment implies inclusion, recognizes values rooted in truth and steer towards the common good. Freedom, grounded in human dignity, entails accountability – before one’s conscience, before others and before God. Spirituality leads to prayer, which is not simply petition, but the willingness to align one’s actions, and one’s life, to a higher moral horizon. In the context of global disorder and institutional fragility, spiritual responsibility renews ethical commitment and inspires genuine leadership.

4. The topics to be dealt with and the Structure of the Conference

The Conference will address two specific issues within this broader *problematique*, **one micro- the rebalancing of individual freedom and solidarity** for personal development and a renewed engagement in the community; and the other **macro: - the reform of international law and multilateralism at the regional and at the global level**. Both topics require **a new investment in spirituality and the SDC**, because peace and peacebuilding - as St. Augustin reminded us in the Confessions- require “resting in God” at the level of individuals and communities.

Following on from the 2025 Conference structure, the 2026 Conference will be organized in **one full day meeting**, starting with the Holy Mass in the early morning, and envisaging **two plenary sessions**, one in the morning and the second in the afternoon. In-between them, there will be **parallel Sessions** that apply *mutatis mutandis* the **Synodal method**.

The International Conference will be preceded by the **General Assembly of the FCAPP** on Thursday 28th May. The Assembly is the annual meeting of the members and stakeholders of FCAPP. It is public, as it is open to all interested participants, namely those attending the International Conference of the following day. The topic of the GA is related to that of the international Conference, i.e. “Catholic Social Thought facing the challenges to freedom and pluralism in a disordered economy and society. Renewing the vision of the Centesimus Annus”. St. John Paul II’s Encyclical is at the origin and at the heart of the mission of the Centesimus Annus Foundation. For more detailed information, see the program.

The day after the International Conference, HH Pope Leo XIV will receive the participants in a private audience at the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican.

5. The first plenary session: “The dramatic challenges to freedom and pluralism in today’s fractured and disoriented societies. How spirituality enlightens personal development and community engagement”.

The **first plenary session** will focus on the **individual human being** with her/his aspirations to freedom and identity, his/her roots in and commitment to multiple and diverse communities (pluralism), his/her “restless heart” and ultimate destination to the City of God. All processes of change, conversion and redemption must start from the minds, hearts and souls of people. **Freedom and pluralism** are

essential features of the integral human person. Freedom is rooted in human dignity, because each and all of us were created in God's image and ordered to truth and the common good (*Centesimus Annus* and *Gaudium et Spes*). Pluralism gives value to the diversity of individuals and societies (at the cultural, political and even religious level) and enables the discernment of conscience and the fruitfulness of dialogue. Freedom and solidarity therefore are not only attributes of societal and institutional arrangements, but first and foremost they are a state of mind and soul, a condition for personal development and engagement in the community. In today's **stressful and fractured societies**, individuals suffer anxiety, depression and burnout.

Particularly the vulnerable ages (the youth and the elderly) and the vulnerable social conditions (the homeless, immigrants, minorities, the poor, etc.). Secularization and relativism have brought about loss of sense, solitude and isolation, irresponsibility and a surcharge of claims and artificial needs. Pernicious viruses have nested in society implanting anger, resentment, rage and hatred and feeding the search for scapegoats, the refuge in tribal and polarized dependencies, the lure of palingenetic and often violent way-outs. Amplified by social media, made realistic by AI, exploited by unscrupulous politicians, those viruses affect the health and stability of society, generating mistrust and hostility. Psychologists, pedagogists, social scientists, theologians have been struggling with those social diseases affecting not only the poor, but also the middle classes and the well-offs: "The Burnout Society" (Byung-Chul Han), "The Anxious Generation" (Jonathan Haidt), "Age of anger" (Pankaj Mishra), "Bowling Alone" (Robert Putnam), "The Origins of Totalitarianism" (Hannah Arendt), but also "The Search for Meaning" (Viktor Frankl) and "La joie de croire" (Madeleine Delbrel).

Pope Leo XIV recently spoke of the "dramma della libertà" (drama of freedom), living in the tension between the aspiration to the perfection of virtue, and the rejection of the temptation to become like God. From both this aspiration and this refusal, the new man, the free man is born, who realizes oneself "in the love of God and the neighbor", "the continuous regeneration of the self aimed at freeing and conforming with the Father and the brothers".

How can SDC address those threatening scenarios? How do we realign freedom with virtue and responsibility? How do we secure meaning and resilience, responsible leadership and true identity? In which way can we reconnect with transcendence and the search for truth? How can we relaunch dialogue and strengthen the foundations of our communities?

The Session will discuss those issues highlighting the **important contribution of the SDC** and the **role of spirituality** in promoting the conversion of the soul and the peace of mind, without which there can be no just and lasting peace, no real dialogue nor solidarity. The Panel will include SDC experts, psychologists, educators, artists and policymakers aiming at getting concrete suggestions on what to do next and how to reconnect the individual and the community.

6. The Parallel Sessions: Different Ways to the SDC

The **parallel sessions** will be organized in several **groups**, similarly to the approach in 2025, reflecting different views on the topic and the different issues facing the different continents and communities of the world. The topics were identified on the basis of promising threads that have emerged in the course of this year, or alternatively on the basis of suggestions received from the FCAPP Chapters (for details see the program). The assumption is that there are many and **different “ways to the SDC”**, which will inspire different priorities, perspectives and traditions in the approach to reforms, personal development, global governance and peacebuilding. The important thing is that those different perspectives converge and cross-fertilize through multilateral dialogue, rather than clashing and diverging. They should “harmonize polarities and ethical tensions, rather than create polarizations” (Romano Guardini).

Here is the list of the topics of the Parallel Sessions:

- Artificial Intelligence, freedom and spirituality: can AI enhance freedom and pluralism? And the search for spirituality? Under what conditions?
- Research and Training on Catholic Social Doctrine: New Topics, Gaps and Opportunities.
- Peacebuilding in Europe: political integration as a way to peace
- Post-conflict reconciliation and peacebuilding: practical experience in different contexts and implications for the integration of migrants and interreligious dialogue
- Integrity and Effectiveness of Communication and Evangelization in the Age of AI, Social Media and Fake News.
- Liberty and liberation: the experience of popular movements in Latin America. The double challenge of development from below and populism.
- Le origini della Centesimus Annus e della FCAPP: lezioni dalla storia

- Abrahamic dialogue from the Mediterranean on the “Rerum Novarum” and human development: moving on from the 2023 Manifesto towards common approaches to social and economic issues.
- The Asian way to the SDC: responsible leadership, religious pluralism and good governance
- Synodality among Catholics in theory and practice: how can FCAPP, and the SDC, contribute to avoiding and /or overcoming polarizations among Catholics
- Growing Catholic communities and development opportunities in Africa: lessons from Pope Leo’s travels and vision

7. The second plenary session: “How to mobilize conscience and action to build new frameworks for Multilateralism and International Law”

The subtitle of this session, and its starting point, could be: “World Disorder. What went wrong, and how to contribute to fix it”. The old world-order was based on multilateralism and international law. But in the present geopolitical crises what has prevailed is unilateralism and the use of force, or the threat of the use of force, for settling disputes and negotiating agreements. SDC has always upheld in the past the role of multilateral negotiations based on the rule of law, equal dignity of all nations and a rules-based international order founded on laws, agreed treaties and conventions. It has recognized the role of international organizations where peer dialogue and the implementation of international law are promoted, monitored and supervised. The problem is that not only going back to the old order of the past appear unrealistic, but also that the old order is not perceived today as fair and effective, particularly by vulnerable and developing countries. It has in fact reflected wide inequalities among countries, power-based relations, conflicting blocks and polarizations, rather than agreed principles and shared values. The old order was dominated throughout the postwar period by the most powerful states. It ignored by-and-large the claims and expectations of the poor and most vulnerable communities. Besides, it failed to reform trade rules (see for instance the failure of the “Doha round”), could not prevent or fairly manage financial, climate and health crises, and it was not able to build and maintain peace. We need therefore a **new world order based on a reformed multilateralism and a more effective formulation and implementation of international law**. International trade, above all trade in services, requires rule-based frameworks, and agreed dispute settlement

mechanisms. Idem for investment, supply-chains, finance, energy and skills. We need a multilateralism based on shared ethical foundations, oriented towards the common good and integral human development, focused on human rights and poverty eradication, capable of enforcing rights and norms, sanctioning abuses and ensuring a just and lasting peace. In one sentence we need a **world order inspired by the SDC, dialogue and universal values**. The plenary session will discuss the challenges and opportunities for reform, the views of international organizations, foreign policy specialists, religious and lay experts in SDC, policymakers, and members/stakeholders of the CAPPF.

The Conference will finish with a **session of conclusions and a final Meditation**.