

The New Ethical Multilateralism

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We have arrived at a pivot of history. The world system that emerged at the end of World War II is over. The seeming truths of an earlier age have become dangerous illusions of our own age. We have arrived at a new multipolarity – a world with several centers of power – but not yet at a multilateralism that pursues the common good. Our survival depends on fostering an ethical multilateralism in which the world's nations and religions pursue the common good while respecting the diversity of the human family.

Pope Leo XIV has spoken eloquently about this urgent task:

The commitment to building a safer world, free from the nuclear threat, must be pursued through respectful encounters and sincere dialogue, to build a lasting peace, founded on justice, brotherhood and the common good, No one should ever threaten the existence of another. It is the duty of all countries **and all the Faith communities** to support the cause of peace, initiating paths of reconciliation and promoting solutions that guarantee security and dignity for all. (St. Patrick's Basilica, June 24, 2025)

For several centuries, roughly from 1700 to 2000, the nations of the West, meaning Europe and the United States, dominated the politics and economics of the rest of the world. European powers colonized much of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. This created a dangerous and persisting habit of power in the Western world.

After World War II, as former colonies in Africa and Asia became independent nations, world power was divided between the US and Soviet Union. For a brief time after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US seemed to dominate the world as the sole superpower.

The dramatic economic rise of China, India, southeast Asia, western Asia, and parts of Africa and Latin America has created a new multipolarity. The spread of prosperity to many parts of the world is deeply heartening, yet the spread of power has come without a corresponding sharing of responsibility for the common good.

To the contrary, the world is driven by power, greed, and conflict, rather than trust, peace and the common good. The old powers of the West fight to sustain past privileges, while rising powers insist on their place in the sun. Wars rage and diplomacy is moribund, especially the diplomacy so much needed among the major powers.

The creation of the United Nations in 1945 was a major advancement in pursuit of the global common good, and it has done much to foster the independence of formerly colonized nations and the spread of material wellbeing. The UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human



Rights, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the recent Alliance for Peace declared by the UN Alliance of Civilizations, are all inspiring models of global cooperation.

Yet in its 80th year the UN is not able, in current form, to address the many and growing global crises. The spread of wars, and war crimes, as in Gaza, and other parts of the world offer the starkest evidence of the need to bolster multilateralism.

The recent UN Summit of the Future brought widespread calls for a UN 2.0 to bolster the UN system. Following the proposal of Pope Francis in *Laudate Deum*, this should include a "multilateralism from below" (n. 38), engaging civil society, especially in the challenge of protecting Earth itself from environmental devastation:

The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power. It is to be hoped that this will happen with respect to the climate crisis. For this reason, I reiterate that “unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment”.

The Catholic Church, ancient and modern, has repeatedly offered humanity indispensable guidance in the pursuit of the common good, speaking not only to the Church’s faithful but to all of humanity who seek wisdom amidst rapid change. St. Augustine, in *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), shared the blessed wisdom that “It is greater felicity to have a good neighbor at peace than to conquer a bad one by making war.”

In modern times, Pope Leo XIII spoke of the new things of industrialization in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, laying down the precepts of an ethical economy. In 1963, Pope John XXIII gave indispensable guidance to the leaders of the Soviet Union and the US in his magisterial call for peace in *Pacem in Terris*. In 1967, Pope Paul VI welcomed the newly independent nations of the world in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, where he declared that development is the new name of peace. In 1991, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Pope John Paul II spoke of a need for a new moral economy. In 2009, after the onset of the 2008 financial crisis, Pope Benedict underscored financial ethics in *Caritas in Veritate*. In 2015, Pope Francis, of beloved memory, opened the path to a new multilateralism in *Laudato Si’*, calling for a new harmony with nature.

In 2019, Pope Francis emphasized the healing powers of encounter, mutual respect, and diplomacy as the true path to peace, in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Pope Leo XIV has recently emphasized, “If you want peace, prepare institutions of peace.” (May 30, 2025)

In its modern social teachings, the Church draws upon the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas, who some 750 years earlier merged the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity with the cardinal virtues championed by the ancient Greeks, including practical wisdom, fortitude, moderation,



and justice. Following Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas and the modern Church have taught that the structures of politics and economic life, notably the institutions of government and the market economy, must be infused with ethics, meaning the pursuit of the common good through the cultivation of the virtues. Power without virtue leads to despotism. Multipolarity without ethical multilateralism leads to war and chaos.

Multilateralism needs an institutional upgrade as well as the new “software” of global ethics. The UN 2.0 needs global taxes to meet global needs, including the funding of the UN system itself. Global trade in armaments, shipping, aviation, international financial transactions, and emissions of carbon dioxide and methane, are all key bases for global taxation. The UN Security Council needs to be empowered by a reform of the veto process so that the will of the international community and the imperative of peace prevail over the veto of a single nation. A new global parliament at the UN alongside the UN General Assembly (one country, one vote) should bolster the legislative capacity of the UN system.

Multilateralism also needs a radically reformed global financial architecture designed to support sustainable development and ensure the stability of nations and financial systems around the world. The new architecture should end the predatory and extractive behavior by some of the world’s most powerful governments and companies, and should ensure the global diffusion of knowledge to enable all nations to share in global prosperity.

Such reforms vitally depend on a shared ethical framework. Can a highly diverse world discern a shared ethics of the common good? The answer is yes, for the reason given by the Catholic Social Teachings. We share a common humanity and therefore a common human nature. For that reason, all human beings can subscribe to a common natural law, built upon our humanness. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, we are all children of God, created *Imago Dei*. In the Confucian tradition, all men are brothers within the four seas. In the Hindu tradition, the world is one family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*). In the Muslim faith, human beings are Allah’s representatives on earth, entrusted to act justly and care for the creation. Similar beliefs in the unity of the human family are found in other faiths.

Consider the Islamic tradition, which enshrines a vision of universal solidarity and justice. The concept of *ummah* extends naturally to a broad human fraternity, enjoining mutual aid and equitable distribution of resources through institutions such as zakāt (obligatory donation) and waqf (community endowments). Moreover, the higher objectives of Islamic law offer a robust framework for global governance that prioritizes human dignity, social welfare, and environmental guidance.

Across cultures and religions, common ethical foundations enable us to pursue the common good, and to create conversations across cultures and faiths to share in the sacred and



transcendent dimensions of life. The Golden Rule is both an exemplar and core of the natural law. We must promote a shared ethics and new modes of cooperation across nations, cultures, and religions.

The list of global crises is large and growing, and all require a global ethics directed towards the common good.

The nuclear proliferation crisis, the crises of poverty, debt and development, the ecological crisis, the migration crisis, and the displacement of hundreds of millions of people due to conflicts, climate-related disasters, poverty, or other causes, all cry out for a new and effective ethical multilateralism. As President John F. Kennedy wisely stated, “The supreme reality of our time is our indivisibility as children of God and our common vulnerability on this planet.”

The proliferation of nuclear weapons, now to nine countries, puts humanity on the precipice of nuclear war. The Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists is at a mere 89 seconds to midnight. The spread of wars and tensions among the great powers underscore the urgency and necessity of nuclear disarmament. Nearly 100 nations have signed the *Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW), yet shockingly not one of the nuclear-armed nations has yet done so.

In a world of great wealth, in which the 20 richest individuals have a combined net worth of more than \$3 trillion dollars, extreme poverty for more than 1 billion people remains an urgent yet solvable crisis. Investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure and business development in the poorest countries can end extreme poverty, yet the burden of current debt payments often prevents such investments. Roughly half of the world’s poorest people (those living in multidimensional poverty) are in countries experiencing debt distress and needing some form of debt relief.

The rapid spread of Artificial Intelligence also requires a global ethics – *algorithethics* – to ensure that AI is directed towards the common good. AI offers enormously powerful new tools to overcome the age-old scourges of poverty, hunger, and disease. Yet AI also poses four grave perils.

The first is the rapidly increasing concentration of wealth. The second is the rapidly increasing concentration of power in the hands of a few large tech companies and the state. The third is the misuse of the AI technologies to oppress citizens, purvey propaganda, spread deep fakes, induce digital addictions, and destroy privacy. The fourth is that artificial systems replace human responsibility and accountability, such as autonomous weapons in war. Yet if well directed used, AI can positively support civil society by providing decentralized platforms for “bottom-up” action, open data, crowdsourcing, and detection of propaganda and deep fakes.



Multipolarity is the reality of our time, ethical multilateralism our urgent need, and our shared humanity our basis for hope. We can forge a new multilateralism based on the effective global institutions together with a shared global ethics. The strengthened global institutions will not supplant our national or local governments but rather augment them and empower them. The Church's crucial teaching of *Subsidiarity* as a mode of social order, calls for placing political responsibility at the level closest to the people where that responsibility can be effective. This notion applies both to the UN and global ethics. Moreover, at the global level, the Church has always spoken of an "international community," meaning that we should aim for a true family of nations, based on mutual respect and shared concerns.

The UN should not aim to supplant our nations and religious communities, but to support nations, religious authorities and civil society to accomplish what they cannot do at their level of governance. Priorities for the UN include global actions to stabilize the Earth's climate system, protect the oceans, sustain biodiversity, promote nuclear disarmament, end wars between nations, reform the global financial architecture, end extreme poverty with external assistance as needed, and generally support nations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Similarly, a new global ethics must not aim to impose a uniformity of social values, religious beliefs, or cultural norms on highly diverse societies. Rather, global ethics should aim to end wars, ensure the equal rights and dignity of all nations, spread prosperity through reform of the global financial architecture, and promote cooperation among all nations, religions, and ethnic groups to achieve the common good. The preeminent virtues for inter-communal peace include mutual respect, compassion, empathy, benevolence, justice, and fairness, virtues that are highlighted in the great wisdom of the ancient sages and the world's religions. Such virtues, the Church teaches, emerge from the Grace of God.

The Church has a unique vocation in promoting the new ethical multilateralism. The Church uses its good offices and global goodwill to help mediate and solve raging conflicts. The Church's charitable actions through many organizations and grass-roots efforts alleviate suffering and provide role models for others. The Church's academies and councils provide principled analyses of the ethical needs of our times. The Church's social teachings are a heritage for all humanity.

Uniquely, the Church can gather the world's religious leaders together with political leaders, academicians, and civil society into the shared pursuit of the common good. In the Jubilee Year 2025 and a year in advance of the 40th Anniversary of the World Day of Prayers for Peace in Assisi convened by Pope John Paul II in 1986, we may look with hope towards the birth of a new era of peace based on global virtues and common purpose, and drawing upon the Church's social teachings to help bring the new era into being.