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Democracy and the Church

DOI: 10.35757/CIV.2009.11.08

Today the democratic form of government enjoys universal acceptance even within the Church.¹ However, this has not always been the case. The destruction of the natural order established by God Himself was perceived as part of this democratic revolution. The barbarity which was experienced during the French revolution along with its attempt at subjugating the Church hierarchy under civil authority seem to only prove this thesis. On the theoretical level, a problem of principle importance to democracy itself which is how to reconcile the fact that on the one hand all authority comes from the people and its complementarity with the Christian teaching based on Chapter 13 of the *Letter to the Romans*, that is the idea that every state authority derives its power from God Himself. Among the many practical problems that have been raised one of them, the so-called “Roman Question” that is the papal prerogative to political sovereignty in the Church State remains unresolved. All this was caused by the authoritative statements declared by Gregory XVI and Pius IX in clearly condemning the spirit of liberalism.

However, in the other statements of various Popes, beginning with Leo XVIII, the thesis that nations enjoy the liberty to choose

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¹ Cf. John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 46.

any political system and that any political system can be tolerated, so long as the common good is developed was upheld.² This had been clearly stated by Leo XIII in the encyclicals *Diuturnum illud* of June 29th 1881, *Libertas* of June 20th 1888 and *Au milieu des sollicitudes* of February 15th 1892. While the Pope does not clearly defend democracy, it certainly affirms the need of the Church to detach itself from any problems of political system. In the encyclical *Graves de communi*, while Leo XIII uses the term “Christian Social Democracy” it is not used here to define a political system of a State, rather a social initiative inspired by the teachings of the Church.

An important turning point for the evolution of the teachings of the Church concerning the political systems of a State was the homily delivered by Pius XII on the Christmas of 1944. The Pope deeply impressed by the historical events of the period of the destructive war and the totalitarian regime affirms that the Church cannot continue to remain indifferent and neutral in the face of various forms of political systems of the State. “The events of the present times” teaches the Pius XII, “calls for a true and healthy democracy.” The term “democracy” here was not used in a political but moral sense, for the attention of the Church is directed “not so much to the internal structure and organization, which depends on the aspirations proper of each race, but to man, as someone who cannot be used as an object, relative to some passive element of social life, he should be respected as an autonomous subject, the basis and aim of this life.”³

In the same vein, John XXIII almost thirty years later, mentions in the encyclical *Pacem in terris*: “But the aspirations We have mentioned are a clear indication of the fact that men, increasingly aware nowadays of their personal dignity, have found the incentive to enter government service and demand constitutional recognition

² Cf. Leon XII: *Immortale Dei*, para. 36.

³ Cf. Pius XII: Radio message *Benignitas et humanitas* on occasion of Christmas, December 24, 1944.

for their own inviolable rights. Not content with this, they are demanding, too, the observance of constitutional procedures in the appointment of public authorities, and are insisting that they exercise their office within this constitutional framework.”⁴ Along with the dignity of the human person, comes the “right to take an active part in public life, and to make his own contribution to the common welfare of his fellow citizens.”⁵ The active participation means the right to choose those who can exercise authority in a State, to decide on the form of government in a State, and to determine the principles and obligations of those in power.⁶ Further on, the Pope affirms that “One can therefore see, that the teaching that we have demonstrated here, is in accordance with the true principles of a true democratic system.”⁷ These postulates, democratic in theme, must find its legal foundations in the democratic institutions which in turn find their foundation in John Locke and Montesquieu. “We think, however, that it is in keeping with human nature for the State to be given a form which embodies a threefold division of public office properly corresponding to the three main functions of public authority.”⁸ Today’s first postulate concerning the legal system of the State is the codification, in a brief and clear form, of the basic rights of man, which in turn should constitute the basis of the entire political system of the State.⁹ “[...] that a clear and precisely worded charter of fundamental human rights be formulated and incorporated into the State’s general constitutions,”¹⁰ [...] “It must be clearly laid down that the principal function of public authorities is to recognize, respect, co-ordinate, safeguard and promote citizens’ rights and duties.”¹¹

⁴ Jan XXIII: *Pacem in terris*, para. 79.

⁵ *Ibidem*, para. 26.

⁶ *Ibidem*, para. 52.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, para. 68.

⁹ *Ibidem*, para. 75.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, para. 76.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, para. 77.

A Similar teaching can be found in the Vatican Council II document *Gaudium et spes*.¹² However, in this document the word “democracy” is not used at all. In its teachings, the Church today condemns “those political systems, prevailing in some parts of the world [...] which hamper civic or religious freedom, victimize large numbers through avarice and political crimes, and divert the exercise of authority from the service of the common good to the interests of one or another faction or of the rulers themselves.”¹³ Another thing which is inhuman is “for public authority to fall back on dictatorial systems or totalitarian methods which violate the rights of the person or social groups.”¹⁴

The teachings of John Paul II has brought the Church at the main front of the debates on Democracy in the Communist countries in Europe, but likewise in States governed by dictators in Africa, South and Central America and in industrial countries in Asia of archaic political structures.

The theoretical problem concerning the Divine origin of political power often taken advantage of by followers of the Old Order, had already been clarified by Leo XIII in 1881 in his encyclical *Diuturnum illud* where the Pope states that in democratic elections authority itself is not established only he who is to exercise the power is chosen.¹⁵ John Paul II develops this idea much further. In *Redemptor hominis* the Pope writes: “The essential sense of

¹² “Praise is due to those national procedures which allow the largest possible number of citizens to participate in public affairs with genuine freedom.” (Vatican Council II: *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Gaudium et Spes*, no. 31); “It is in full conformity with human nature that there should be juridico-political structures providing all citizens in an ever better fashion and without and discrimination the practical possibility of freely and actively taking part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community and in the direction of public affairs, in fixing the terms of reference of the various public bodies and in the election of political leaders.” (*Ibidem*, para. 75).

¹³ *Ibidem*, para. 73.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, para. 75

¹⁵ Cf., Leo XIII: *On the Origin of Civil Power: Diuturnum illud*. “It is of importance, however, to remark in this place that those who may be placed over the State may in certain cases be chosen by the will and decision of the multitude, without opposition to or impugning of the Catholic doctrine. And by this choice, in truth, the ruler is designated, but the rights of ruling are not thereby conferred. Nor is the authority delegated to him, but the person by whom it is to be exercised is determined upon.” *Diuturnum illud*, no. 6.

the State, as a political community, consists in that the society and people composing it are master and sovereign of their own destiny.”¹⁶ This in turn brings to mind the formulation used at the turn of the XV and the XVI centuries to justify the principle of the sovereignty of the nation, according to which the origin of authority may only lie in the power in of the entire political community who compose a given nation, and not in the hands of a few individuals. The authority of the State does not represent the interest of a particular group of individuals, nor does it represent the power under whom they subjugated but they are responsible before the entire community, to all individuals alike. The economic progress of a country as well is connected to the democratic political system. Poor nations, according to John Paul II, need the reform of some of its unjust structures, particularly of political structures which need to substitute corrupt, dictatorial and authoritative governments with other more democratic forms of governments which allow for civic participation. “For the «health» of a political community – as expressed in the free and responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs, in the rule of law and in respect for the promotion of human rights – is the necessary condition and sure guarantee of the development of «the whole individual and of all people.»”¹⁷

The clear support of the Church for democracy was likewise influenced by the writings of Jacques Maritain. According to him the normal condition, to which every human society should tend to is that in which “the people participate in the political life as an adult or mature person.”¹⁸ Such a political system is precisely best exemplified by democracy. Pius XII presents this particular system as the “natural postulate.”¹⁹ However, the question arises whether the coherence between Democracy and the Christian

¹⁶ John Paul II: *Redemptor Hominis*, para. 17.

¹⁷ John Paul II: *Sollitudo rei socialis*, para. 44.

¹⁸ J. Maritain: *Chrześcijaństwo i demokracja* [Christianity and Democracy], “Znak” 1992, no. 4 (443), pp. 45–52.

¹⁹ Pius XII: Radio Message *Benignitas et humanitas...*

vision of the person and Society as something much more essential or is it simply a matter of chance? Maritain in his work *Christianisme et Democratie*²⁰ demonstrates the Christian roots of the contemporary idea of democracy. Here Maritain in further developing Henri Bergson's thought, generally claims that there is one particular difference which sets the vision of democracy of the Age of Antiquity apart from the contemporary vision. The City-State of the Age of Antiquity based on slavery and therefore dependent on a fundamentally unjust system and other graver problems was essentially a false democracy.²¹

A similar observation can be traced in the writings of other contemporary authors: "Should we one morning wake up to find ourselves in Ancient Athens," writes Giovanni Sartori, "we would probably think that democracy was an unbearable authority [...] aggressive, [...] overwhelming and unworthy of trust and respect [...]. We would probably use the term «totalitarian,» to describe such a government depending on our definition of that word."²² It is only with Christianity, with its teachings on the concept of inviolable rights of the person, equality, political rights of the people, and the absolute value of relationships based on law and justice as the basis of society and based on fraternal love, created a new Vision of political order which all contemporary nations aim to implement.²³ If not for the Christian concept of democracy, the democracy that we know today, would probably have taken a different form.²⁴

According to Jacques Maritain, democracy emerged in history as a "temporal manifestation of the evangelical inspiration."²⁵ "In the democratic ideal and in the «democratic state of the soul» one

²⁰ J. Maritain: *Christianisme et Democratie*, New York 1943.

²¹ Cf. H. Bergson: *Dwa źródła moralności* [The Two Sources of Morality], Kraków 1993, p. 273.

²² G. Sartori: *Teoria demokracji* [The Theory of Democracy], Warszawa 1994, p. 481.

²³ Cf. J. Maritain: *op. cit.*

²⁴ Cf. J. Salij: *Dylematy naszych czasów* [Dilemmas of Our Times], Poznań 1994, pp. 105–122.

²⁵ J. Maritain: *op. cit.*, p. 47.

has to see the enormous effort to overcome one's nature which does not mean making an effort contrary to one's nature, but the effort and struggle to correct one's natural instincts, which has taken place in history thanks to the influence of the Christian ferment [...].²⁶ This has led certain Christian thinkers to conclude that the basic issues of Classical Catholic social ethics such as personalism, the common good and the principle of subsidiarity, do not merely coincide accidentally with the liberal-democratic form of government. The Democratic form of government seems, taking into consideration at least the present conditions in the world today, indispensable for the realisation of these values.²⁷

The fact that the ideas developed under the influence of the evangelical ferment and democratic aspirations has been tagged by nineteenth century Europe as the "emancipation of reason" Maritain considers "as the most absurd historical contradiction."²⁸ If there should be any ongoing debates between the Church and State on democracy, as we can see, they do not deal with the evaluation or justification of the need for democracy, rather these debates tend to centre on the form and shape that democracy should take. For democracy, in a general sense, does not define any form of state or government, but only the subject and manner of exercising authority.²⁹

Ethymologically, the word "democracy" means the authority of the people. Modern democracy, historically sprouted as a rebellion against the absolute form of government. During the Age of Reason, ideas and institutional forms of checking the government were developed. The division of power, the self-governance of judges, parliament with the right to collect taxes, etc. were postulated on. The road to the realization of these postulates

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

²⁷ G. Weigel: *Jeszcze Jedna rewolucja XX wieku* [Just One More Revolution in the Twentieth Century], "Więź" 1994, no. 7 (429), p. 54.

²⁸ J. Maritain: *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁹ Cf. E.W. Böckenförde: *Wolność – państwo – Kościół* [Freedom, The State, The Church], Kraków 1994. p. 31.

was the formulation of an electoral law and the organization of political parities. According to the principle of the government for the people, the government cannot exercise its authority and perform an office without the people's consent. That consent is not granted once and for all, but the granting of this consent is a continuous process. Apart from that, this permission is not only restricted to a passive indifference but should be supported by active participation.³⁰

What lies at the very foundation of this kind of thinking is the conviction of the equality of all citizens. Here lies as well one of the fundamental differences between contemporary democracy and the Athenian democracy. In Ancient Greece, the rights of a citizen were granted only to those realizing military service or those who benefitted from those rights. Slaves and metics, the country folk and other inhabitants were deprived of these rights and often treated as a subjugated people.³¹ During the Modern Age the idea of equality evolved gradually as well. The community was divided into freemen and slaves, depending on various factors such as birth, extent of possessions, the amount of taxes paid, literacy skills, religion and gender. These kinds of factors decided on the granting of the right to vote in elections. Contemporary democracy has been evolving against its original ideal that the right to govern should be limited to those who are properly disposed for reasons of noble birth or material status. Electoral rights today depend on age, place of residence and citizenship. No one is eliminated arbitrarily as a potential leader. No one who has leadership qualifications is not, because of his material status or noble birth, deprived of the chance to hold public office or to shape his political fate.

If, however, we are convinced of the essential equality of all men, as preached by the *Declaration of Independence* of

³⁰ Cf. J.H. Hallowell: *Moralne podstawy demokracji* [The Moral Foundations of Democracy], Warszawa 1993, p. 52.

³¹ Arystoteles [Aristotle]: *Ustrój polityczny Aten* [The Political System of Athens], Warszawa 1973. Cf. also J. Salij: *op. cit.*, pp. 105–122.

the United States, we are not referring here to equality in the empirical sense of the word. For so long as we limit our way of thinking to that which can be empirically proven, the conclusion that “all men are born equal,” must seem even nonsensical. This statement can only be understood properly if we understand equality in its spiritual sense. All men are born equal before God; the soul of every human being is equally valuable in the eyes of God, every person should be treated with the respect proper of beings created in the image and likeness of God.³² The spiritual equality of all men, a constitutive principle of democracy, was essentially spiritual and unknown in Ancient Greece where the individual was not understood as a person in the way we understand it today. This fact cannot come as a surprise, especially if we remember that democracy “historically speaking was inspired by religion.”³³ For the essence of democracy does not consist in the principle of the majority. It rests on the concept of the human person who acknowledges in each and every person that same dignity.

The second essential principle which lies in the foundations of democracy is related to monotheism, that is the dignity of the people. This entered into the consciousness of the laity, according to Maritain, in the same way that the dignity of the person as a member of the entire humanity, from the teachings of the Gospel. The mutual complementarity of the people and the Church can be likewise traced to etymological roots. The Greek word *demos* in 5 BC meant the “Athenian” society (or a similar one), gathered as one congregation of people *ekklesia*.³⁴ This was precisely the term that the Christians used to define their community. “The people of faith, the people of God,” writes Maritain, “the people of the Kingdom called to participate in the works of Christ; people as a community of citizens in a given country, united under just

³² Cf. J.H. Hallowell: *op. cit.*, p. 79.

³³ J.H. Billington: *The Crisis of Communism and the Future of Freedom*, “Ethics and International Affairs” 1991, vol. 5, p. 88.

³⁴ G. Sartori: *op. cit.*, 38.

rights; people as a community of physical work and as a reserve and potential of humanity representing those who work hard against the forces of nature, the idea of people, as a consciousness for the lay people gradually shaped itself, and has its origin from the confrontation and coalescence of all these elements, its common root is the Christian heritage of the world.”³⁵

For the conviction in the dignity of the people originates from the belief in the fact they can govern themselves, or to say it more precisely, that the people can choose anyone sensible and diligent enough to fulfill the role of legislators.³⁶ This in turn is closely related to the idea of essential reasonableness not only of individuals but of a society as a whole.

Pope Pius XII in his Christmas homily preached in 1944 juxtaposes the idea of the people, as an organic and organized unit with the idea of the human mass which is the enemy of authentic democracy.³⁷ Democracy is a system of governments based on persuasion and debates, appealing to human rationality. It is contrary to ochlocracy. If democracy in fact rests on the manipulation of society, then it does not deserve the name of true democracy. If in the communication between society and government, the rational element should be lacking, then politics would be transformed into “managing the house of the mentally ill.”³⁸ The conviction of the dignity of the people and the dignity of the human person should coincide with each other. “The right of the whole in relation to each individual,” writes Bernhard Sutor, [...] may [...] only concern issues, which in the name of the common good, demand mandatory regulation. This should be practiced in harmony with the dignity and rights of persons and social groups. That is why a sovereign nation [...] must determine its own legal and institutional borders.”³⁹

³⁵ Cf. J. Maritain: *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁶ Cf. J.H. Hallowell: *op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁷ Cf. Pius XII: *Radio Message Benignitas et humanitas...*

³⁸ Cf. T. Arnold: *Symbols of Government*, New Haven 1935, p. 232.

³⁹ B. Sutor: *Etyka polityczna* [Political Ethics], Warszawa 1944, p. 194.

For no absolute authority exists in any society. No sovereign as a whole nor as a majority exists. This principle has been termed as “the circle of democracy.”⁴⁰ If democracy emerged as a rebellion against the absolute power of the monarchy, the principle of a legitimate state acknowledges that the people as well, and every kind of majority, cannot have absolute power but in accordance to the principle of the limitation of power, is answerable to the law. This, in the first place, is the constitutional law, which should not easily yield to instrumentalization, as other articles of the law. In the second place, follow human rights and finally the natural law, which is beyond the power of men.⁴¹

Should we accept Maritain’s argument, that the contemporary concept of the people has its roots in religion, it is but only reasonable to draw the following observation, that the Church is universal, open to all, and that it is “externally” limited by the content of the Christian Credo. The same analogy can be used to refer to the autonomy of democracy. “For the people,” Maritain argues, “is neither God, nor do they possess infallible reason nor immaculate virtues; the will of the people or the spirit of the people is not the basis of the criteria to decide what is just or unjust.”⁴² A way of thinking contrary to what has been argued which grants the majority some prerogative of Divine infallibility or absolute primacy is closely related to collectivism, regardless of what kind of theory it would base itself on.⁴³ Liberty and equality, taken together, both strengthen and limit the principle of the majority. In order to ensure the healthy progress of human activity, a “healthy theory of the State” is necessary.⁴⁴ Arguing in favour of democracy, which can either be interpreted in a liberal and totalitarian sense – as it has been convincingly by Jacob

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁴¹ Cf. J.Y. Calvez and H. Tincq: *L’Eglise pour la democratie*, Paris 1992, p. 61.

⁴² J. Maritain: *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴³ Cf. Leo XIII: *Libertas*.

⁴⁴ John Paull II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 44.

L. Talmon⁴⁵ – does not suffice. What is needed is to complete this principle of democracy with the ideal of democracy of “the principle of the “rule of law”, in which the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of individuals.”⁴⁶

The idea of State of the Law (*Rechtsstaat*), contrary to the concept of Legislation of the State (*Gesetzesstaat*), in which the law is identified with the legislation, refers to the content and extent of democracy identifying its borders according to the will of the majority. The lack of any restrictions for the will of the majority is the most serious threat to democracy itself, as Alexis de Tocqueville had already once said: “Absolute power seems to me an evil and dangerous thing. The absolute universal government goes far beyond the capacity of any man, no matter how exceptional he may be, and I think that it is only God who can be omnipotent, for His wisdom and justice is always equal to His capacity and His power. On earth, on the other hand, no power which is worth such a respect and neither would it possess such a law, to whose uncontrolled activity and unchecked power, I would consent to. When I see therefore any power to whom the law of universal authority is granted, regardless of the fact if it bears the name of the people, or of the king, of aristocracy, or of democracy, or if it functions in a monarchy or a republic, I would say: Here is the seed of tyranny, I should look therefore for another place to live. My greatest contention against the government of such a democracy, as it has been founded in the United States, is, contrary to what most people in Europe would call its weakness, but rather precisely its power. And what I would most fear in America would not be unlimited freedom, but rather the lack of security against tyranny.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cf. J.L. Talmon: *O demokracji totalitarnej* [On Totalitarian Democracy], “Znak” 1992, no. 4 (443) pp. 67–80.

⁴⁶ John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 44.

⁴⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville: *O demokracji w Ameryce* [Democracy in America], Warszawa 1976, p. 196.

The principle of majority and the principle of the State of Legislation, understood as the subjugation of all human authority to the natural law, is of equal importance for democracy. It is for this reason that John Paul II speaks of “an authentic democracy” which “is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person.”⁴⁸ This in turn presupposes the conviction that a transcendental truth does exist. “Today, people would usually claim that,” writes the Pope, “philosophy and the attitude that would best reply to the needs of a democratic form of politics is agnosticism and sceptical relativism, while those who know the truth and decide to follow this road to the truth, would not be from the democratic point of view worth trusting, for they do not believe that it is the majority who decides on the truth nor do would they believe that the truth would depend on the changing political options which would gain advantage.”⁴⁹

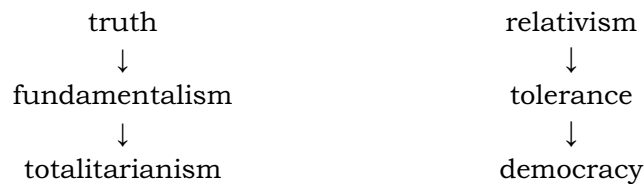
John Paul II in analyzing the totalitarian system known to him through his own personal experience, presents a thesis opposed to that popularly acknowledged belief. Totalitarianism, in his opinion, comes from the negation of the objective truth. When a transcendental truth does not exist, obedience to which man

⁴⁸ John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 46.

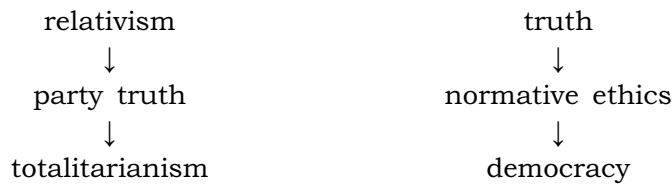
⁴⁹ Ibidem. “The Western elites tend to think on the relationships amongst the full of vigor Jewish religion and Christianity, moral convictions and the liveliness of democracy in the categories of zero games, and in doing so often imagining some kind of Iranian model of Ayatollah Chomeini: the deep the moral and religious conviction, the weaker the democracy. However that caricature, often very complicated (and for this reason more interesting) relationship is partly the result of the tendency of the Western elite to present democracy in extremely formal categories, or the agreement of procedures in usual issues (concerning to the greater extent the settling of disagreements!) rather than the real experiment in the field of local government. However, democracy would certainly mean much more than just procedures. A democratic policy would not be possible in long run without the democratic tact. While democratic tact is not possible without the righteousness of the people, aware of their capacity to make wise choices, people who are committed to the defense of one’s individual freedom in an environment of true pluralism, and participating at the same time in the implementation of the common good, [...] democracy maintain and strengthens moral and religious convictions, which respects the world of politics, while relegating its claim to indivisible competence” (G. Weigel: *Ostateczna rewolucja. Kościół sprzeciwu a upadek komunizmu* [The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism], Poznań 1995, p. 255).

gains a full identity of himself, then no law, no principle would exist to guarantee just relationships between people. And if no transcendental truth is acknowledged, the force of power triumphs and each man would aim to take advantage of all the means accessible to him, each man would enforce his own advantages or his own opinions, ignoring the rights of others.⁵⁰ “It is true,” we read in *Evangelium vitae*, “that history has known cases where crimes have been committed in the name of “truth”. But equally grave crimes and radical denials of freedom have also been committed and are still being committed in the name of “ethical relativism.”⁵¹

The opinion, recently quite popular, that has been questioned by the Pope, can be illustrated with the following model:



The Pope is convinced of the real existence of the opposite dependence between the conviction of the existence of absolute truth and democracy. This can be illustrated in the following manner:



The basic misunderstanding which has resulted in the accusation of the Church of the tendency to totalitarian motivations, springs from its approach to the truth. Western thinkers and politicians

⁵⁰ Cf. John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 44.

⁵¹ Cf. John Paul II: *Evangelium vitae*, para. 70.

often perceive Christianity in a similar manner, in the same way that the great ideologies of the twentieth century has led to the rise of totalitarian systems or islamic fundamentalism as we know it today. “Nor does the Church close her eyes,” writes the Pope, “to the danger of fanaticism or fundamentalism among those who, in the name of an ideology which purports to be scientific or religious, claim the right to impose on others their own concept of what is true and good. Christian truth is not of this kind. Since it is not an ideology, the Christian faith does not presume to imprison changing socio-political realities in a rigid schema, and it recognizes that human life is realized in history in conditions that are diverse and imperfect. Furthermore, in constantly reaffirming the transcendent dignity of the person, the Church’s method is always that of respect for freedom.”⁵²

The Holy See of the Church undoubtedly runs the risk of behaving like any ruling political party. However, the essential difference lies in the basic starting point. In the materialistic political system, it is the party which defines the truth. Truth belongs to the party and lies at the party’s disposal. In the democratic system, truth runs the dangers of being treated as a product of politics, the imagination of the will of the majority, or as in the case of Marxism, truth can become fabricated.⁵³ According to the Christian world view, truth precedes man. “Man initially behaves himself receptively and not productively before the truth,” writes Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “The Community of the Church needs as a historical condition the right functioning of reason, but this does not mean that the Church coincides with truth. The Church does not establish truth. It is truth that establishes the Church and defines the limits of its knowledge. Truth in all this remains independent of the Church, while the

⁵² Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, para. 46.

⁵³ Cf. J. Ratzinger: *Znaczenie wartości religijnych i etycznych w społeczeństwie pluralistycznym* [The Meaning of Ethical and Religious Values in a Pluralist Society], in: *Naród. Wolność. Liberalizm* [Nation. Freedom. Liberalism], “Kolekcja Communio” 1994, no. 9, p. 185.

Church is instrumentally subjugated by the truth.”⁵⁴ This means that the Church does not own the truth, but is instrumentally subject to the truth, it is, just like the State, limited by truth.

In reality, it is relativism, willingly confessed in liberal circles, that is the true threat to democracy. The totalitarian deviancy of liberalism is, as Michel Schooyans, bears the name of anarchism.”⁵⁵ In an anarchic society, those who reach power are the strongest, it is they who enforces their will on the remaining members of the human society. Their will takes the form of the power of the law. The weakest who cannot withstand this earthly arena of competition, along with other goods, are abandoned in this race. No longer are they perceived as producers or consumers, rather they become products whose fate depends on the presented utility, party ideology, current interests and even at times the caprices of the strongest.

In a society where no objective ethical norms exist, the race for the most advantageous legislation becomes the norm of public life. “It is for this reason,” as Maciej Zięba OP has observed, “that such a society is gradually subjected the pressure of groups, fractions and political parties, for whom it is moral when their rights are extended, and immoral when their privileges are restricted.”⁵⁶ Democracy has time and again been transformed into a “show democracy,” where the politician stands in the so-called theatre of politics, and the game is played by its players in calling the citizens’ attention to things other than the real intention of those in government. This way of doing politics, associated with the the abandoning of moral principles, leads to apathy and discouragement, and as a consequence to the

⁵⁴ J. Ratzinger: *Kościół – ekumenizm – polityka* [The Church – Ecumenism – Politics], Poznań – Warszawa 1990, p. 207.

⁵⁵ M. Schooyans: *Totalitarne zagrożenie demokracji dziś* [The Totalitarian Threat of Democracy Today], “Ethos” 1993, no. 2–3 (21/22), p. 126.

⁵⁶ M. Zięba: *Kościół wobec liberalnej demokracji* [The Church and Liberal Democracy], in: M. Novak, A. Rauscher, M. Zięba: *Chrześcijaństwo, demokracja, kapitalizm* [Christianity, Democracy, Capitalism], Poznań 1993, p. 147. A similar analysis was made by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Libertas*.

disappearance of political commitment and the weakening of the spirit of citizenship of the people, which in turn are necessary for the proper functioning of democracy.⁵⁷ This ultimately transforms democracy into an open or camouflaged totalitarianism.⁵⁸ The word “camouflaged” in this case mean, that man is deprived of any real influence on the fate of a political community to which he belongs to, and in this sense becomes the property of the State, despite the fact that all the democratic procedures seemingly function well. As a result of the interconnection amongst capital, politics and media, much of the essential information, necessary for the decision-making process, is often made available moreover, oligarchical and supraparty connections cause that the policy of State in fact hardly depends on the results of the elections. “Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends,” writes John Paul II, “It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power.”⁵⁹ Complete relativism has made everything object of contracts and negotiations, a temporary compromise contained in the total struggle of everything against everything. “The «right» ceases to be such, because it is no longer firmly founded on the inviolable dignity of the person, but is made subject to the will of the stronger part. [...] The State is no longer the «common home» where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a tyrant State, which

⁵⁷ Cf. John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 47; This is a real threat primarily because people have the natural tendency to passivity. As Owen Chadwick claims: “People would prefer that others govern, in the same way that they would prefer that others would fix the roads or collect the rubbish.” O. Chadwick: *Demokracja i religia* [Democracy and Religion], in: K. Michalski (ed.): *Europa i społeczeństwo obywatelskie. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo* [Europe and Civil Society. Conversations in Castel Gandolfo], Kraków 1994, p. 133.

⁵⁸ Cf. John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, para. 47.

arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the life of the weakest and most defenceless members, from the unborn child to the elderly, in the name of a public interest which is really nothing but the interest of one part. [...] Really, what we have here is only the tragic caricature of legality; the democratic ideal, which is only truly such when it acknowledges and safeguards the dignity of every human person, is betrayed in its very foundations: «How is it still possible to speak of the dignity of every human person when the killing of the weakest and most innocent is permitted?» [...] When this happens, the process leading to the breakdown of a genuinely human co-existence and the disintegration of the State itself has already begun.”⁶⁰

Such a pseudo-democratic society makes itself the ultimate judge of its own moral legality. By removing the objective criteria of good and evil it deprives minorities the right to differ from the opinion of the majority. In this case, the majority of a society turns its back on the minority, “pushing them in the margin of society, putting pressure on them and trying to destroy them.”⁶¹ If democracy is none other than the obedience to the will of the people, then, as John Hallowell observes, it practically does not differ from fascism. It is worth noting that, “that which essentially differentiates various dictatorships in the past is precisely the fact that they come from mass movements and have a wide social base.”⁶² Regardless of how such a government has obtained its right to power, if it does not respect the dignity of the human person, it will cease to be called a tyranny, even a tyranny of the majority.

The analysis of the breakdown of democracy and its transformation into a totalitarian system, made by John Paul II, echoes the description of the individual and social disintegration presented by Plato in the Book VIII of *The Republic*.⁶³ “Anarchy in

⁶⁰ John Paul II: *Evangelium vitae*, para. 20.

⁶¹ John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 44.

⁶² J.H. Hallowell: *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁶³ Platon [Plato]: *Państwo* [The Republic], Warszawa 1990.

the soul of man caused by the loss of faith in the existence of an absolute truth leads to the anarchization of social life. The false concept of freedom, understood as a license, leads to anarchy, while anarchy finds its expression in dictatorship.”⁶⁴ “The totalitarian State becomes possible as a consequence of the questioning of the existing of a higher power,” writes John Hallowell, “while its totalitarian character comes from its refusal to acknowledge that aspect of human life, which legislatively cannot be subject to political control.”⁶⁵ Totalitarian dictatorship is the embodiment of naked force. It rejects the demands of reason, justice and God. Its total character is the unavoidable consequence of the lack of any kind of acknowledged authority. “In the case wherein no authority higher than the authority of the State does not exist, one cannot refer to any other authority, the will of the tyrant becomes the ultimate Court of Appeal, and that will is often completely arbitrary.”⁶⁶ In reality we are dealing here with a tyrant regardless of the fact whether the personal dignity of the person is violated by an individual, group, class, nation or State, or the majority of a given society.⁶⁷

John Paul II in presenting the danger of democracy transforming into a totalitarianism, does not refer to a hypothetical danger but to the tragic experience of our century. The rise to power of the Fascists of the Republic of Italy or of the Nazis of the Weimar Republic came so peacefully, that it was hardly noticed, and in principle with but minimal deviations from the continuity. The phantom of the Weimar Republic must stand as a grave warning to us all. Democracy is not, on the contrary, a finished product, rather as George Weigel writes, “it is the neverending moral experiment concerning the human capacity to govern themselves on their own.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ J.H. Hallowell: *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁶⁷ Cf. John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 44.

⁶⁸ G. Weigel: *op. cit.*, p. 77.

The right to participate in power, expressed in democratic institutions, does not, on its own, guarantee the defense of human rights, which are not the consequence of the principle of the majority, it is rather its restricting principle. The rights of a person, warns Leszek Kołakowski, “may be destroyed by the approval of the majority, it may be a despotic or even a totalitarian order which the majority supports is not only something imaginable but something that can be illustrated by well-known examples. A society torn apart by fear and desperation, lost in panic, can search its exit in tyranny, which would deprive individuals, even those who support this regime, personal rights. The majority granted Hitler, Chomeini and perhaps even Mao, if not through active help, then at least powerless subjection to violence.”⁶⁹

Faced with the real danger of the repetition of the same situation, the Church has untirelessly reminded all of close connection between the ideal of democracy and the ideal of human rights, formal regulations with unchanging ethical norms. In a democratic state, basic moral laws, whose roots lie not in established laws, should be, along with just judicial power, respected. For this reason, “the Church cannot cease in preaching the truth of the integral basic character of human values,” reminds the Pope in a gathering with the Diplomatic Corps in Warsaw, “which when treated selectively question (disturb the order of) the basis of social order. Pluralistic States therefore cannot ignore ethical norms in its legislation and public life.”⁷⁰ For the norms which are being referred to here establishes the solid basis and long-lasting guarantee of just and peaceful conviviality of all people, in the same way that true democracy can only grow and flourish by acknowledging the equality of all citizens, who all enjoy the

⁶⁹ L. Kołakowski: *Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych* [Civilization in the Dock], Warszawa 1990, p. 250.

⁷⁰ John Paul II: *The Holy See has never accepted the “tragic paradox and curse of our times.” Speech to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to Poland* (June 8, 1991), in: *Ducha nie gaście. Jan Paweł II w Polsce. 1–9 czerwca 1991* [Be not Discouraged. John Paul II in Poland. June 1–9, 1991], Paris 1991, p. 273.

sames rights and responsibilities. Moral norms which do not and cannot allow acts internally wrong and evil cannot exempt anyone. "It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the «poorest of the poor» on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal."⁷¹

The connection between democracy and morality belongs to, as it has been mentioned, the most essential elements of European Culture. "The root of this civilization, in its social aspects, is the idea that the State and any individual for that matter are responsible to the transcendent moral norms [usually acknowledged as norms revealed by God, who rules all states and not just particular individual]."⁷²

According to John Paul II, life in a society depends on the decisions made based on the strong moral convictions.⁷³ "Democracy," explains Joseph Ratzinger, "is closely related to eunomy, with the range and importance of good law, and it is only in this respect can it become a democracy. For this reason, democracy is not merely the rule of the majority, while the mechanism of defining the majority should find itself under the control of the common rule *nomos*, that that which is in its very essence is law, in other words the obligatory *foros* which is measure of the range of values and apply to the majority as well. [...] Democracy can only function properly if the conscience, which should likewise obey and direct itself according to the basic fundamental Christian values, values which can likewise be implemented even in a non-Christian religious context."⁷⁴

The Church's support for democracy is something unquestionable. However, not every kind of democracy automatically is in keeping with the teachings of the Church. This depends

⁷¹ John Paul: *Veritatis splendor*, para. 96.

⁷² G. Weigel: *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁷³ Cf. Jan Paweł II: *Przemówienie do chrześcijańskich demokratów Europy, 2 grudnia 1991 r.* [Speech to the Christian Democrats of Europe, December 2, 1991], cited in: G. Weigel: *op. cit.*, p. 307.

⁷⁴ J. Ratzinger: *op. cit.*, p. 264.

on a democracy's relation to truth and freedom. John Paul II in his pilgrimage to Paraguay said: "Yes, I am not preaching democracy; I preach the Gospel. All questions related to human rights likewise belong to the teachings of the Church, and should democracy mean human rights, then democracy would belong to the teachings of the Church."⁷⁵

In the context mentioned above, one can speak of two types of democracy: a democracy based on the truth on man, and a democracy based on relativism. The principle of personalism studied and analyzed by the Catholic social teaching demands that the truth on man be respected in establishing any law. "In a social order, man should not only limit his freedom," as Stefano Fontana writes, "rather he should acknowledge that no absolute freedom exists. He should be aware of the fact, that his own freedom is not only limited by the freedom of another by some kind of compromise, rather it is limited in its very root, as is the freedom of another person, it is limited by the truth concerning the human person and by the law and responsibilities which spring from this truth."⁷⁶ The Christian vision of democracy as a consequence leads to the differentiation of two spheres in the socio-political order in both of which different rules apply to. In one of those spheres, the democratic principle of the

⁷⁵ John Paul II: *Wywiad w drodze z Chile do Paragwaju* [Interview on the Road from Chile to Paraguay], cited in: G. Weigel: *op. cit.*, p. 74; "Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally, democracy is a «system» and as such is a means and not an end. Its «moral» value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behaviour, must be subject: in other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs. [...] But the value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights, and the adoption of the «common good» as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored. [...] Even in participatory systems of government, the regulation of interests often occurs to the advantage of the most powerful, since they are the ones most capable of manoeuvring not only the levers of power but also of shaping the formation of consensus. In such a situation, democracy easily becomes an empty word." (John Paul II: *Evangelium vitae*, para. 70).

⁷⁶ S. Fontana: *Ten przerażający paragraf 20. Evangelium vitae i kwestia społeczna* [The Overwhelming Paragraph 20. Evangelium Vitae and Social Issues], "Społeczeństwa" 1995, no. 2, p. 238.

majority would apply while in the other it would not. "In a just constitution," writes Rocco Buttiglione, "the principle of the majority, the principle of the legitimate State and the State of Law are all equally important. Values and principles exist which not even the majority can do away with. Constitutions precisely exist in order to confirm and promote these values and principles. A constitution however cannot equally affirm two basic principles without strictly restricting the limits of both of them: the principle of the majority and the legitimate State. In cases where the good of the people is at stake then the principle of the majority should be applied. Things would look differently when the interest of the people is not at stake here, that is when there would be the need to distribute the weight of taxes or when there is a need to decide on how to distribute the efforts necessary for the realisation of the common good; but when there is a need to decide on questions related to the truth, in such cases, the principle of the majority is not applicable."⁷⁷ This happens because human interests are "disposable" and can thus be made into decrees, values on the other hand cannot be disposed of, nor made into decrees. This, in consequence would lead to the differentiation of two types of laws: laws concerning the national budget and laws concerning elemental norms. The Church supports democracy today, however it does not support one, concrete vision of the political system of the State. It respects the just autonomy of the democratic order, and it does not have a concrete reason for supporting one particular institutional and constitutional solution or another.⁷⁸ "The principle of the democratic philosophy of man and society," writes Jacques Maritain, "can subscribe to the monarchical (constitutional) or oligarchical form of government" though in fact "they would tend to the republican form being its normal form of expression."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ R. Buttiglione: *Chrześcijanizm a demokracja* [Christianity and Democracy], Lublin 1993, pp. 120–121.

⁷⁸ John Paul II: *Centesimus annus*, para. 47.

⁷⁹ J. Maritain: *op. cit.*, p. 52.

In order for authority in a State could be exercised properly in accordance with the principles of democracy, it is necessary to create representative organs. Their nomination, direction and control can be imagined differently without imposing the principle that the united nation is the owner of the power of the State and this power is exercised in the name of this power. The formal regulations elaborated historically and institutionally established forms of democracy in a State of Law today form part of the common good. Institutions which control and collaborate with each other are for a democracy more important than the virtue and charisma of those who in power for a particular term. "They have become more than just an external form," writes Bernhard Sutor, "they are the expression of values, which are based on freedom and the law."⁸⁰ They assure the limitation of power and form one of the safeguards against the transformation of democracy into totalitarianism. This is particularly important in the fundamental politization of human life. "This means that other elements, which constitute the concrete common good of the State," writes Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "must be founded on this base and cannot be questioned in the name, of perhaps, higher values. So long as the root of the common good remains untouched, then the State in principle remains «to be in order,» even if other things that would threaten the common good would take place. [...] For the worst is not when the natural laws are implemented incompletely, but when enterprises and manipulations in limiting the freedom of political opponents are made, even if such manipulations are done in good intention and in the name of enforcing absolute values."⁸¹

A political practice which takes advantage of the formal regulations of democracy demands more patience from citizens and from the existing political forces. However in the long run it would have a greater chance of finding more meritorical solutions

⁸⁰ B. Sutor: *op. cit.*, p. 200.

⁸¹ E.W. Böckenförde: *op. cit.*, pp. 32–33.

than an authoritarian government connected with laws and regulations. This also means that the Church should tend to such a kind of presence in political life, especially when it stands in the defence of the natural law, which in turn does not violate the regulations of democracy. This would guarantee the possibility of correcting a decision, introducing continuous improvements, continuous reform however it should be kept in mind that the perfect realisation of the common good goes far beyond capacity of societies.

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First edition: *Kościół i demokracja*, "Civitas. Studia z Filozofii Polityki" 1999, vol. 3, pp. 79–101.