



Catholic Social Thought and Democracy

Over the course of two millennia, the Catholic Church accommodated itself to a variety of forms of government and thrived—or not—within different political contexts. The Second Vatican Council noted that the cultural, economic, and social evolution of peoples into the mid-twentieth century had resulted in profound changes in human institutions and how people related to one another. This was particularly true of the political community, “especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good...”¹ While the Council did not prescribe a universally ideal form of government, it made clear that “the political community exists for that common good in which the community finds its full justification and meaning...”²

The council then called for enhanced political participation in these words:

It is in full accord with human nature that juridical political structures should, with ever better success and without any discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.³

The right and duty to vote followed, which attaches to every citizen in a participative political society such that, according to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it is “morally obligatory” to exercise the right to vote as an expression of our “co-responsibility for the common good...”⁴

In 1991, following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe two years earlier, Saint Pope John Paul II raised the profile of democracy in these words:

The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.⁵

But democracy itself is not unlimited. It is in turn subject to the duty to protect human rights, to recognize human and religious values, and to respect truth and the rule of law.

Respect for human rights flows from the two most basic principles of Catholic social doctrine: the sanctity and dignity of the human person and the common good. John Paul describes totalitarianism, in contrast to democracy, as denying “the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate — no individual, group, class, nation or State.” In its understanding of the common good, moreover, the Church includes the duty of government to respect the rights of individuals within the body politic. Essential are commonly accepted values such as human life and human rights, including religious freedom, within a framework of the common good. Even in a democracy, then, “Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights...”⁶ John Paul explained further, “As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.”⁷

The pope warns against the dangers of those promoting fanaticism or fundamentalism, who, in the name of scientific or religious ideology, “claim the right to impose on others their own concept of what is true and good.” Truth is not determined by majorities, the pope writes.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Second Vatican Council. (1965). *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 73.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 4 Vatican. (1994). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2240.
- 5 Saint Pope John Paul II. (1991). *Centesimus Annus*, 46.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 46.