

A few remarks on Church and Democracy

As an introduction to the history of the Catholic Church in relation with Democracy, it may be interesting to quote two sentences: “All power comes from God”, and on the other side: “All power belongs to the people”. Although those two quotations might be true together, in the mentality of the 19th century they seemed incompatible. If you add to this that the sovereignty, the supreme authority, in the eyes of philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau belongs to the people, then the clash between the Catholic Church and Democracy was almost preprogrammed.

Probably the democratic movement ie.” the government of the people by the people” as a value, as an idea and later on as a political regime, stems itself from the powerful idea of **autonomy**, beginning in the 16th century: Machiavel, Galilee, Hobbes, etc. In these Modern Times, autonomy was the program in all the fields of human activity : sciences, economy, politics, philosophy, etc, and above all the freedom of the individual from all kind of powers, ecclesiastical of course, but also power of arbitrary governments.... Here exists a strong link with the human rights movement. Here is also the root of many ideologies, “isms” of Modern Times. Liberalism, Capitalism, Nationalism, even in its way Socialism.

The Catholic Church, very much accustomed to authoritarian regimes and social structures, struggled against the emancipation from religious and ethical tutorship (French Revolution); you remember certainly documents like the Syllabus by the very reactionary Pope Pius the IX, in 1864. If you add to this the suppression of the Pontifical States later in 1870, you feel the mood of the Catholic Church. It must be mentioned however that in the USA and also elsewhere, the relations between democratic regimes and the Church where good.

During the 19th century, in relation with the struggle for social justice by the labour force, a second value emerged strongly besides freedom, ie. equality (and participation) Democracy is based on those two values and from there came the push towards universal franchise: one person one vote.

With Leo the XIII arrived a Pope who wanted to open the Church to the dialog with the States of his time. Leo the XIII was the author of the famous socio-economic encyclical Rerum Novarum, but he also signed numerous encyclicas on political matters. His personal favour went in the direction of a monarchy which guarantees the freedom of the Church in its mission. However Leo held the traditional doctrine of the Church: **Neutrality** as regards the political regimes, Democracy included, if the commun good and the freedom of the Church are guaranteed.

In the first half of the 20th century, the main feature to be mentioned in our field, is the emergence of totalitarian or and authoritarian regimes like nazism, communism and fascism. Some of these regimes took the name of popular democracies.

Taking lessons from this experience, Pius the XII concluded that the movement for human rights and the state of law, were very important especially for the Church. He himself was in favour of the dignity of every human person, the movement of personalism, and so there are several incentives to converge with democracies. It must be mentioned that at this time after World War II, most of the Western Regimes were democratic.

However, the last and very important problem the Church-Democracy question was only solved at the Second Vatican Council. The encyclical of John the XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, had prepared the way, It was the vote by the Council of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the document on religious freedom in 1965.

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