

The Catholic Church and Democracy¹

David Polidano

1 Introduction

Writing during the Second World War, the renowned Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain stated that democracy “springs in its essentials from the inspiration of the Gospel and cannot subsist without it.”² Maritain was surely not the first to comment on the relationship between Christianity and democracy. In his 1797 Christmas sermon, Cardinal Chiaramonti, bishop of Imola and later Pope Pius VII, had stated that “Christian virtue makes men good democrats ... Equality is not an idea of philosophers but of Christ ... and do not believe that the Catholic religion is against democracy.”³ About half a century later, in the wake of the French February revolution of 1848, Frederick Ozanam,⁴ the founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, hailed democracy as “the natural final stage of the development of political progress”, and believed “that God leads the world thither.”⁵

In the history of modern democracy⁶ it did take, however, over a century for the Catholic Church to come to look at democracy as an acceptable and eventually a desirable political system. Why did it take the Church so long? How did the Church come to eventually change her view?

1. Unless otherwise stated quotations from official Church documents are taken from the English translation available at the official Vatican website (www.vatican.va).

2. Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and democracy*, San Francisco/CA: 1986, 20.

3. Quoted in Thomas Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution. Catholics in the struggle for democracy and social justice*, New York: 1998, 32.

4. Pope John Paul II beatified Ozanam in August 1997.

5. Quoted in Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 124.

6. It can be said that modern democracy emerged with the American and French revolutions of the latter quarter of the eighteenth century though, of course, the history of democracy can be traced back to sixth century BC Greece.

2 Before World War II

2.1 *The negative impact of the French Revolution*

The main reason behind the Church's reluctance to accept democracy was her experience during the French Revolution. While at the beginning of the Revolution various members of the Catholic clergy manifested democratic tendencies, conflict between the Church and the Revolution erupted when the National Assembly took it upon itself to unilaterally reorganise the Church.

The *Constitution of the Clergy* of 12 July 1790 among other things envisaged the election of bishops and pastors by the people and their subjection to the disciplinary control of the state, the severing of all jurisdictional links with the pope, as well as the reduction in the number of dioceses, making them correspond to the French departments. Within a few months the Catholic Church in France was split into two: the constitutional Church, led by the clergy who took the oath to uphold the constitution, and the so-called non-juring Church, led by the clergy who rejected the oath.⁷

The situation further deteriorated with the de-Christianisation campaign initiated by people like Jacques Hébert and Joseph Fouché. Priests were ordered to marry and some localities with religious names were renamed. On 5 October 1793 the old calendar that constantly reminded people of Christian religion by its Sundays, saints' days, and its Christmas and Easter cycles, was abolished and replaced by a new "more rational" calendar. Throughout the country there was a manifest attempt to replace Catholicism by the cult of Reason.⁸

Even though by 1801, through the concordat negotiated between Napoleon and the Holy See, the Roman Catholic religion was again recognised as "the religion of the great majority of Frenchmen", in the minds of many Catholics the ideals of the Revolution, democracy first and foremost, remained squarely irreconcilable with Catholicism. The nearly six years (1808–1814) Pius VII spent in humiliating captivity for political disagreement with the now Emperor Napoleon, only confirmed Catholic suspicion of anything that had to do with the Revolution.

7. See Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 9–14.

8. See *ibid.*, 23–26.

2.2 The Lamennais debacle

The belief that Catholicism and democracy were irreconcilable was confirmed in 1832 when in response to a memorandum presented by the French priest Félicité Robert de Lamennais to Pope Gregory XVI, the latter issued the ultra-conservative encyclical *Mirari vos*.

Between October 1830 and November 1831, Lamennais together with another priest, Jean Baptiste Henri Lacordaire, and eventually also the layman Count Charles de Montalembert, had published *L'Avenir*, a paper with the slogan "God and Liberty." Their aim was that of Catholicising liberalism and increasing the Church's influence in a new liberal world. They believed that the Church could embrace the change that was taking place all over Europe as an opportunity rather than denounce it as an affliction.⁹ *L'Avenir* thus promoted as ultimately beneficial for the Church complete separation of Church and State, freedom of education, of the press, and of association, decentralisation, and universal male suffrage — virtually all the basic components of modern democracy.

Lamennais and his colleagues believed that eventually liberalism would find its best ally in the Catholic Church under the leadership of the pope, but *Mirari vos* soon cut their hopes short.¹⁰ Pope Gregory's encyclical declared that "it is obviously absurd and injurious to propose a certain 'restoration and regeneration' for her [the Church] as though necessary for her safety and growth."¹¹ Separation of Church and State was considered as an attack against the concord between the temporal and ecclesial authorities "which always was favourable and beneficial for the sacred and civil order."¹² The claim that liberty of conscience must be maintained for everyone is "absurd and erroneous" and "spreads ruin in sacred and civil affairs",¹³ Freedom of the press is "harmful and never sufficiently denounced",¹⁴ and good Christians should always show trust and submission to princes.¹⁵ Lamennais's appeal

9. See Peter Steinfels, "The failed encounter", in *Catholicism and liberalism. Contributions to American public philosophy*, edited by R. Bruce Douglass – David Hollenbach, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne: 1994, 32.

10. See Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 39–60.

11. Pope Gregory XVI, Encyclical Letter *Mirari vos* (15 August 1832) 10: *Eternal World Television Network* (on-line) : <http://www.ewtn.com/library/encyc/g16mirar.htm> [8 May 2003].

12. *Ibid.*, 20.

13. *Ibid.*, 14.

14. *Ibid.*, 15.

15. See *ibid.*, 17–19.

to the Church to repeal its alliance with the throne and instead turn to the people had been turned upside down by the demand of *Mirari vos* for the people's practically unquestionable obedience to the Church and the throne.

2.3 Pope Pius IX and the Syllabus of Errors

In the decades following the Lamennais episode, attempts by Catholics in various countries to reconcile the ideals of modern democracy with Catholicism often met with opposition and condemnation by the hierarchy. In 1863, approaching the end of a political career during which he epitomised Catholic involvement in French politics, Count de Montalembert, Lamennais's former colleague in *L'Avenir*, in a congress of Belgian Catholics in Malines, outlined the advantages for the Church of universal suffrage, equality before the law, and freedom of teaching, of association, of the press, and of conscience. The speech earned Montalembert a quick reprimand by the Vatican and has been said to be one of the last straws moving Pius IX to publish the *Syllabus of Errors* in 1864.¹⁶ Enlisting the errors condemned in previous Church documents, Pius concluded the *Syllabus* by citing the allocution *Jamdudum cernimus* of 1861 where he had condemned the proposition that "the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."¹⁷

2.4 A step forward

The more flexible and socially conscious Pope Leo XIII made an important step away from Catholic pro-monarchic political conservatism when in his 1885 encyclical *Immortale Dei* he declared that, as long as God is considered as the source of all authority, government may legitimately take different forms,¹⁸ and, in certain circumstances, participation of the people in government "may not only be of benefit to the citizens, but may even be of obligation."¹⁹ Pope Leo used ever clearer terms in his 1888 encyclical *Libertas*:

16. See Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 77–79.

17. Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of condemned errors* (8 December 1864) 80: *Eternal World Television Network* (on-line): <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P9SYLL.HTM> [8 May 2003].

18. See Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Immortale Dei* (1 November 1885) 4. 48.

19. *Ibid.*, 36.

... it is not of itself wrong to prefer a democratic form of government, if only the Catholic doctrine be maintained as to the origin and exercise of power. Of the various forms of government, the Church does not reject any that are fitted to procure the welfare of the subject; she wishes only — and this nature itself requires — that they should be constituted without involving wrong to any one, and especially without violating the rights of the Church.²⁰

In both encyclicals, Catholics were encouraged, insofar as the conditions in their country permitted, to involve themselves in local and national politics.²¹ However, the condemnation of freedom of conscience, of religion, and of the press, as well as of the separation of Church and State was reiterated.²²

2.5 Progress stalled

Notwithstanding his previous call for Catholic involvement in politics, in the 1901 encyclical *Graves de communi re*, Pope Leo, under pressure from reactionaries in the Roman curia, showed little enthusiasm to the political import of the emerging Christian democratic movements in various European countries. He stated that the term Christian democracy “must be employed without any political significance, so as to mean nothing else than ... beneficent Christian action on behalf of the people.”²³

Catholic conservative intransigents rejoiced when Giuseppe Sarto became Pope Pius X in 1903. His apprehension about modernism and anything associated with it meant a much difficult time for Catholic democrats. The politically active priest Romolo Murri had most of his work undone when in 1904 Pius dissolved the *Opera dei Congressi* through which he had worked to open the Church to modern social and cultural problems. Murri’s subsequent attempt to form a political party, the National Democratic League, was unsuccessful and he ended up excommunicated in 1909, a victim of the anti-modernist crusade.²⁴ In 1910 Pius X also suppressed

20. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Libertas* (20 June 1888) 44.

21. Pope Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*, 43–45; Id., *Libertas*, 45. Leo did nothing in practice, however, to lift the ban on the involvement of Italian Catholics in national politics imposed by the decree *Non expedit* issued by the Holy Penitentiary in 1868.

22. In regard to the separation of Church and State, Pope Leo, while still basically against it, later acknowledged that, amidst numerous inconveniences, it could have some advantages. See Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Au milieu des sollicitudes* (16 February 1892) 28.

23. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Graves de communi re* (18 January 1901) 7.

24. See Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 246–250.

the French Christian democratic movement *Le Sillon*, which under the leadership of Marc Saignier, heralded democracy as a superior form of government, promoted Catholic participation in French political life, and encouraged their collaboration, on the social and political levels, with members of other religions as well as with non-believers.²⁵

2.6 *The inter-war period*

Don Luigi Sturzo, the pioneer of Christian democracy in Italy, waited till the end of the First World War and the complete uplifting of the ban against Catholic participation in Italian national politics to extend to the national level the work that for about two decades he had been doing in his Sicilian hometown of Caltagirone.²⁶ Under Pope Benedict XV, it was now more feasible to launch successfully a national Christian democratic party.

Despite the remarkable success of Sturzo's Popular Party — just a few months old, the party garnered 20 percent of the votes in its first attempt at the polls in 1919 — it was soon to be dissolved, to an extent thanks to the Vatican's short-sighted preference for the autocratic regime of Benito Mussolini. Zealously opposed to any Catholic collaboration with the socialists, and with no sympathy toward the Christian democrats, the newly elected Pope Pius XI fell for Mussolini's rhetorical praise of the importance of Catholicism for the glory of Rome and his offer to settle the long standing Roman question.²⁷ Although Pius XI had no ideological preference for fascism,²⁸ for him and his entourage, a supposedly friendly authoritarian Italian government could in practice be better than a democratic system that had often

25. See Pope Pius X, Letter *To the bishops of France concerning the Sillonist movement* (25 August 1910) : *Eternal World Television Network* (on-line): <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P1010825.HTM> [31 July 2000]. Many of the democratic, social, and ecumenical ideals of the Sillonists criticised in this letter, half a century later, would be espoused by the Catholic Church in Vatican Council II. See also Paul E. Sigmund, "Catholicism and liberal democracy", in *Catholicism and liberalism*, 223–224.

26. Pius X in 1905 had lifted partially the *Non expedit* ban, allowing bishops to ask for dispensation from the ban in particular circumstances. Through this, Pius wanted to back the conservatives' endeavour to keep the socialists and the radicals at bay in national elections. See Pope Pius X, Encyclical Letter *Il fermo proposito* (11 June 1905) 18–19.

27. The so-called Roman question had been waiting for settlement since 1870 when the newly formed kingdom of Italy annexed the Papal States.

28. See Thomas Bokenkotter, *A concise history of the Catholic Church*, revised and expanded edition, New York: 1990, 348–349.

turned to power anti-clerical liberals and could even lend itself to fulfil the pursuit of the feared godless socialists. When in 1923 Mussolini wanted to pass a bill in parliament to abolish the proportional electoral system, Sturzo, uncompromisingly opposed to the bill, was ordered by the Vatican to resign from parliament and within some months he was advised by the Roman curia to leave Italy. Eventually, unwilling to compromise with the Fascists and disowned by the Vatican, the Popular Party — together with all the other parties except for Mussolini's — was dissolved by the government in 1926.²⁹

The Holy See's implicit support of Mussolini's regime was rewarded in 1929 with the Lateran Treaty. Although the treaty circumscribed the Holy See's initiative in seeking settlement of international temporal disputes, it recognised the Roman Catholic religion as the only state religion of Italy and achieved the settlement of the Roman question by establishing the Vatican City as a free and sovereign state under the jurisdiction of the Holy See.

About two years after the signing of the treaty, Mussolini's totalitarian government ordered Catholic Action organisations to be disbanded on the pretext that they were getting involved in politics — an order executed in various cases with violence. Pope Pius XI now seriously doubted “whether the former benevolences and favours were indeed actuated by a sincere love and zeal for religion, or whether they were not rather due to pure calculation and to an ultimate goal of domination.”³⁰ Although he refrained from condemning outright the Fascist government, Pius finally started to realise that he had been used by the Fascists whom he now calls “a regime based on an ideology which clearly resolves itself into a true, real pagan worship of the State.”³¹ Besides, Pius had just issued the social encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* wherein he formulated the principle of subsidiarity.³² In contrast with fascist totalitarianism and communist collectivism, this principle sees the concrete person as the point of departure for all social activity and indirectly affirms that man has basic rights with respect to the state.³³ Pius was advocating a principle that in effect would later be considered as basic to true democracy.

29. See Bokenkotter, *Church and revolution*, 284–293.

30. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Non abbiamo bisogno* (29 June 1931) 17.

31. *Ibid.*, 44.

32. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo anno* (15 May 1931) 79–80.

33. See Ad Leys, *Ecclesiological impacts of the principle of subsidiarity* (= *Kerk en Theologie in Context* 28), Kampen: 1995, 78–83.

The Italian experience was, however, not enough for the Vatican to refrain from entering another ill-fated agreement, in July 1933, this time with Hitler's German Reich. Hitler had only been Chancellor for only about six months, but some acquaintance with his racist and anti-democratic ideology should have cast serious doubts upon his trustworthiness. In fact, not long after, the Concordat was infringed by Hitler's Reich and in 1937 Pius XI himself declared that he had consented to Germany's proposals only "despite many and grave misgivings."³⁴ The tragedy at this point in time was that the Vatican continued to look narrowly at the particular rights and freedoms of the Catholic Church and was slow to realise that instead she should champion the rights and freedoms of all men and women, first of all for reasons emanating from the Gospels, but also for the long term interest of Catholics themselves.

2.7 Seeking to understand the Magisterium's position

In order to understand the Catholic Magisterium's position against many of the main principles of liberal democracy during the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, in addition to the negative experience of the Church during the French Revolution,³⁵ one must keep in mind her repeatedly negative experience under many of the often actively anti-clerical liberal bourgeois regimes. Under such regimes, in the name of liberty, the Church saw much of her freedom curtailed. In effect, continental European liberalism generally "understood the separation of Church and State to imply the irrelevance of religion to the public order and the sole right of the state to control all aspects of public life,"³⁶ hence the Church's condemnation of this kind of separation. In this context, freedom of conscience and of religion amounted, in the view of the Magisterium, to the capitulation to relativism and religious indifferentism.

The theology of the Magisterium was, at this time, caught in the entanglements of the modern dualism that counterposed freedom and order, autonomy and creaturehood.

34. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender sorge* (14 March 1937) 3. In this encyclical, Pius protested against the Reich's violation of the Concordat and also attacked the perverse misappropriation of religious terminology by Nazi propaganda.

35. See paragraph 2.1 The negative impact of the French Revolution, *supra*.

36. Joseph A. Komonchak, "Vatican II and the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism", in *Catholicism and liberalism*, 86.

This led, on the one hand, to Feuerbach's famous cry, "To enrich man, one must impoverish God," and, on the other, to the not uncommon Catholic habit of counterposing "the rights of God" to "the rights of man." The result was the *cul-de-sac* in which the "Enlightenment" was considered by some to require the emancipation from religion, and modernity was thought by others to be nothing but "apostasy." The only way out of that dead-end was to start making distinctions which both sides had often been unwilling to make.³⁷

Unfortunately for the Church, the far-sighted distinctions already made by various Catholic liberals and Catholic democrats remained for long unheeded and too often condemned by the Magisterium.

3 Democracy in Catholic Magisterium since World War II

It had to be the harsh and devastating experience of the Second World War to decisively turn the Catholic Magisterium from a critic and an opponent of democracy to one of its strong supporters.

3.1 *The 1944 Christmas message on democracy*

Pius XII in his famous 1944 Christmas message acknowledged that in the present age "the democratic form of government appears to many as a postulate of nature imposed by reason itself."³⁸ Elaborating his vision of democracy, Pius distinguished between the masses, whose instincts and impressions are easily manipulated by dictators, and the true people made up of persons each of whom is conscious of one's own responsibility and of one's own views. The masses thus understood constitute the capital enemy of democracy while, on the other hand, the true people is its source.³⁹

The pope conceived of democracy in a broad sense, democracy that "can be realised in monarchies as well as in republics" and he acknowledged equality and liberty as its ideal.⁴⁰ He appealed for a democracy grounded upon Christian morality

37. *Ibid.*, 82.

38. POPE PIUS XII, broadcast message *Christmas 1944*, 19: *Eternal World Television Network* (on-line) : <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P12XMAS.HTM> [8 May 2003].

39. See *ibid.*, 21–34.

40. See *ibid.*, 16. 27.

to secure the desired “objectivity, impartiality, loyalty, generosity, and integrity” of the system.⁴¹ “If the future is to belong to democracy, an essential part in its achievement will have to belong to the religion of Christ and to the Church.”⁴²

3.2 *Pacem in terris*

A most important breakthrough in the official Vatican position regarding the necessary corollaries of democracy, that is the basic liberties of the individual, was made by Pope John XXIII in the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*. In it he stated that each man is a person and as such “has rights and duties, which together flow as a direct consequence from his nature” and which are “universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable.”⁴³ Among these rights Pope John enlists the rights so frequently negated in previous papal encyclicals like the right to “freedom of speech and publication”, and “to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of his own conscience.”⁴⁴ In accepting freedom of religion, *Pacem in terris* “swept away the single most important obstacle to the acceptance of democracy by the Vatican — its belief in the theoretical superiority of the union of Church and State.”⁴⁵

Although John XXIII says that “it is not possible to give a general ruling on the most suitable form of government” as this depends on the particular circumstances of place and time,⁴⁶ he declares that the right to active participation in public life and, more specifically, to take part in government is a natural consequence of man’s personal dignity.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the pope promotes frequent public consultation by authorities as well as regular succession of public officials, in effect advocating periodic elections.⁴⁸

3.3 *Vatican Council II*

Of all the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the two most relevant for our discussion here are the declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, and the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes*.

41. See *ibid.*, 37–41.

42. *Ibid.*, 82.

43. Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris* (11 April 1963) 9.

44. See *ibid.*, 12, 14.

45. Sigmund, 228.

46. See Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, 67–68.

47. See *ibid.*, 26, 73.

48. See *ibid.*, 74; Sigmund, 228.

In *Dignitatis humanae*, the council fathers reaffirmed “that the human person has a right to religious freedom,”⁴⁹ in view of the right to freedom of conscience.⁵⁰ In *Gaudium et spes* the right to “activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience,” and “rightful freedom even in matters religious” are listed among the things “necessary for leading a life truly human.”⁵¹ The abandonment of the medieval ideal of the confessional state is thus confirmed. In this regard, *Dignitatis humanae* clearly states that while civil authority should recognise the religious life of the citizens and show it favour, it would, however, “clearly transgress the limits set to its power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious.”⁵² Furthermore, in *Gaudium et spes*, the council fathers asserted that the Church on her part

does not place her trust in the privileges offered by civil authority. She will even give up the exercise of certain rights which have been legitimately acquired, if it becomes clear that their use will cast doubt on the sincerity of her witness or that new ways of life demand new methods.⁵³

Although *Gaudium et spes* remained open to other forms of government, it paid tribute to democracy when it praised “those national procedures which allow the largest possible number of citizens to participate in public affairs with genuine freedom.”⁵⁴ Additionally, the citizens’ free and active participation in political life is described as being “in full conformity with human nature.”⁵⁵

3.4 After Vatican Council II

In the years after the Council the Church became progressively one of the foremost promoters of democracy. In Spain, where the Church had for long supported Franco’s dictatorial regime, the link between the hierarchy and the government began to loosen, especially through the new vision espoused by the younger clergy and bishops.⁵⁶ In Latin America, many military regimes found themselves unable to use the Church, now publicly endorsing democracy, as a

49. Vatican Council II, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* (7 December 1965) 2.

50. See *ibid.*, 3.

51. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965) 26.

52. Vatican Council II, *Dignitatis humanae*, 3.

53. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

54. *Ibid.*, 31.

55. *Ibid.*, 75.

56. See Sigmund, 230.

source of legitimacy. Instead, in most Latin American countries the Church became a refuge for human rights groups and provided support to political opponents of the authoritarian regimes.⁵⁷

The Church also played an important role in the historical processes leading to the fall of communism in Eastern European countries. Pope John Paul II, hailing from Poland — the most Catholic of the Eastern bloc countries — has been considered by many as a chief catalyst in bringing about the fall of communism and the advent of democracy in Eastern Europe.⁵⁸ In *Centesimus annus*, the pope himself recognised and gave thanks to God for the role played by the Church in recent years in furthering the world's democratisation:

An important, even decisive, contribution was made by the Church's commitment to defend and promote human rights. In situations strongly influenced by ideology, in which polarisation obscured the awareness of a human dignity common to all, the Church affirmed clearly and forcefully that every individual — whatever his or her personal convictions — bears the image of God and therefore deserves respect. Often, the vast majority of people identified themselves with this kind of affirmation, and this led to a search for forms of protest and for political solutions more respectful of the dignity of the person. From this historical process new forms of democracy have emerged which offer a hope for change in fragile political and social structures weighed down by a painful series of injustices and resentments, as well as by a heavily damaged economy and serious social conflicts.⁵⁹

The resulting quasi-universal consensus with regard to the value of democracy has been considered by John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae* as “a positive sign of the times.” “But,” he continued, “the value of democracy stands or falls with the values

57. See *ibid.*, 231.

58. An unequivocal pronouncement by John Paul II in favour of democratisation can be found, for example, in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*: “[Some] nations need to reform certain unjust structures, and in particular their political institutions, in order to replace corrupt, dictatorial and authoritarian forms of government by democratic and participatory ones. This is a process which we hope will spread and grow stronger. 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.” Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (30 December 1987) 44.

59. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991) 22.

which it embodies and promotes.”⁶⁰ Thus, a recurring concern in the recent teaching of the Magisterium on democracy is that it should be built on the values and rights that emanate from true respect to the dignity of the human person, and which are *per se* above the dictates of majority rule. Human rights are indeed the subject of much rhetoric in democratic societies, but such rhetoric should be accompanied in practice by their protection and promotion in public life.⁶¹ When a basic human 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,” then “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.”⁶²

In *Centesimus annus*, John Paul II insisted that democracies need a coherent vision of the common good, which involves the assessment and integration of particular interests “on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values.” The tendency in many democracies to consider certain questions on the basis of the electoral or financial power of the lobbying group rather than according to the criteria of justice and morality, sows the seeds of distrust and apathy in the general public, thus undermining democracy itself.⁶³

4 Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, the process by which the Church came to terms with democracy, accepted it as a legitimate form of government and eventually started to promote it as a form of government particularly suited to the dignity of the human person, has been a long one, not without serious setbacks. Today, however, the Church has a clear understanding of the essence of democracy and as Pius XII foresaw in 1944 she has had and still has an important part to play in the achievements of democracy in the world.

The Church has today undertaken the important task of pointing out that democracy is not simply a procedural system that can be employed to reach peaceful agreement on political action. Democracy is not just a mechanism devised to allow popular majorities to rule. Democracy is much more than this. It is a vision based on the fundamental values of freedom and equality. It implies and at the same time fosters

60. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae* (25 March 1995) 70.

61. See *ibid.*, 18.

62. *Ibid.*, 20.

63. See Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 46–47.

the inviolability and the protection of the fundamental human rights based on the dignity of the human person.

In the words of Jacques Maritain, democracy “designates first and foremost a general philosophy of human and political life and a state of mind,”⁶⁴ which is identified by the following features:

inalienable rights of the person, equality, political rights of the people whose consent is implied by any political regime and whose rulers rule as vicars of the people, absolute primacy of the relations of justice and law at the base of society, and an ideal not of war, prestige or power, but of amelioration and emancipation of human life - the ideal of fraternity.⁶⁵

Democracy is primarily the vision “of a society in which all are respected as equals, in which difference is enriching not divisive, and in which human beings discover freedom and fulfilment.”⁶⁶ Of course, such a vision needs embodiment into a procedural system, but it transcends the system as such.

What pertains to the application of the democratic vision is in the end accidental and depends on the particular prevailing conditions. Particular procedures — like, for example, periodical elections, which is the first thing that comes to the mind of many people when they speak of democracy — are important, but their importance is only relative.⁶⁷ On the other hand, what pertains intrinsically to the democratic vision founded on the values of liberty and equality, like the protection of the fundamental human rights of all and the guarantee that those affected by a decision may participate in some way in the decision-making process, is essential.

It is, in my view, this understanding of democracy as a vision that, especially under the guidance of John Paul II, the Church is defending and promoting.

18, St Edward Street,
Birżebbuġa – MALTA.

64. Maritain, 25.

65. *Ibid.*, 57.

66. John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity and democracy. A theology for a just world order*, Cambridge: 1995, 274.

67. In effect, the classical Athenians, for example, looked down towards the selection of public officials by election as this procedure was deemed aristocratic — it naturally favours the well-born, the prominent, and the wealthy. Instead, they usually employed the more democratic procedure of the casting of lots. See John Dunn, “Conclusion”, in *Democracy: the unfinished journey*, 242.