



Strengthening the Culture of Democracy through Values
Position paper by COMECE, elaborated by its Commission for Ethics

Democracy, as a principle laid down in the European treaties, is a precious cultural and institutional achievement passed on to us by previous generations. It is our responsibility to consolidate, promote and improve democracy in Europe in order to pass it on to the next generations. The success of the European project does not depend only on economic integration and scientific and technological progress, but also on the acceptance of a set of fundamental rights and values, such as human dignity, human rights, freedom, non-discrimination, common good, subsidiarity, justice, tolerance, inclusion, solidarity and equity and religious freedom, which underpin democracy, guarantee its proper function and give substance to democracy in practice.

The values which underpin the principle of democracy of the European Union are rooted in the philosophical thought nurtured by Christianity. The Catholic Church, as an important stakeholder in the European society, cannot remain indifferent to democratic processes since the dignity of every resident in Europe, human rights, the values of justice, solidarity and subsidiarity are intertwined with democracy. The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the active participation of citizens in making political choices that hold accountable those who govern them in their responsibility to protect, safeguard and implement those values without which authentic democracy would be weakened.

The Church wishes to humbly contribute to democratic processes in service of the holistic wellbeing of every human person so that big words are not void of their meaning or get easily manipulated¹ (*Fratelli Tutti* 14). In practice, this means that

“Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the "subjectivity" of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility.”²

The European Union has a dual democratic legitimacy as a union of states and citizens. This is expressed by multilevel steps of participation of national governments, national

¹ Encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, Ft 14.

² Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, para. 46.

parliaments and the participation of citizens. The EU institutions and their political decision-makers are aware of the need for a deep analysis and protection of the quality of EU democracy, the legitimacy of its institutions, and their responsiveness to the needs and preferences of the EU member states and citizens.³ The guiding principle of responsible participation of citizens and the established institutions should be the focus.

➤ **Participation in honest, transparent and open political discourse**

Only when the individual citizens become collectively conscious and conscientious of the importance of his or her active involvement in the democratic process does participatory democracy become a reality. Citizens have to acknowledge their power to vote in (or out) members of Parliament according to their conscience, ethical standards and political convictions. It is necessary to advocate for a transparent and accessible electoral system of the EU and to support measures that increase voter turnout. Because of these requirements, European political parties have to be established as strong extra parliamentary organisations that need to increase their visibility in electoral campaigns. The introduction of transnational lists of political candidates for the European Parliament should be studied further.

➤ **Truthful information as a precondition for active participation in a digital culture**

In a highly complicated world, participation requires the need for discernment to make appropriate decisions on many complex and thorny issues. A free media landscape and the freedom of expression in the public sphere are essential for safeguarding truthful information. However, a highly digitized public opinion is also susceptible to the pitfalls of fostering through networks a post-truth culture as articulated recently in the EU Digital Service Act adopted in 2023. This act enhances the transparency, accountability and oversight of social networks to limit the adverse effect of disinformation. We need an open, transparent and honest discussion on how to balance the safeguarding of democratic processes, the protection of individual freedoms and the progressive digitalization of information.

➤ **Subsidiarity**

Subsidiarity is an essential prerequisite for the success of the Union's democratic process. This principle, which has its roots in Christian social ethics, states that the EU may only regulate those areas that cannot be better regulated at regional or EU Member State level. As an expression of the need for the greatest possible participation of the fundamental community, prudent respect for this principle is required. In this regard, the institutional and political protection of subsidiarity must be strengthened by reinforcing the participation of national parliaments in EU legislative and political processes and by implementing better consideration of the work of the European Parliament's committees.

³ See EU Democracy Package, European Commission, 2023.

➤ EU - Enlargement

Nine countries have been granted the official status of “candidate countries” by the EU. They would like to join the Union and respond to the existing social, economic and geopolitical challenges. The COMECE Bishops maintain that “*the future EU enlargement is an opportunity to update the idea of a united Europe rooted in practical solidarity*” and that a “*deep reflection on our common value basis and the special bonds that unite us as a European family*”⁴ is needed. Such enlargement of the Union will pose a significant challenge to the institutional functioning. The rules of the European Parliament and the European Commission regarding their composition must be reviewed. At the same time, a responsible discussion regarding the budgetary components of the accession of candidate countries is needed.

Cultural norms, values, and good practices crucially shape ethical participation and citizenship. Catholic Social Teaching illuminates how cultural dynamics intersect with its foundational principles, emphasizing the transformative power of cultural engagement to foster peace, respect for life, and intercultural dialogue. In a globally connected yet often culturally fragmented world, misunderstandings and conflicts can exacerbate divisions. The fostering of a culture of an open, transparent and honest dialogue within cultural diversities is the way forward to bridge divides, build solidarity among communities, and enhance democratic resilience through the consolidation of the active participation of all stakeholders. Beyond legal and political rights, cultural responsibilities call for the nurturing of and participation in a creative history, language, education, and tradition. This is what Pope Francis meant in *Evangelii Gaudium* by a “*culture of encounter*”. Therefore, an inclusive culture, dialogue and a peaceful coexistence that builds common understanding are the cornerstones for the democratic resilience of Europe.

⁴ Statement of the COMECE Bishops on Enlargement, Spring plenary 2024 in Poland.