



International Political Conference:
“Politics as an Area for Expressing Christian Values in Everyday Life”
Round Table III: Christian Values and ecclesiastical expression

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Before all, it seems necessary to me to devote a word to the Catholic social teaching. It can be seen as a *corpus* of moral principles and values about social life. Actually, from its very beginning, at the end of XIX century, it has gathered an entire series of interpretations and instructions about all the aspects of social life.

Christian values and European values

From the point of view of the Catholic social teaching, the values are considered altogether as integral part of an inseparable living organism, that form a kind of homogeneous *corpus*. The *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church* (2006) distinguishes between principles and values. As principles are mentioned the dignity of the human person, the common good, the universal destination of the goods, the subsidiarity, the participation, the solidarity. They «constitute that primary articulation of the truth of society», that imply «the question of freedom and of the meaning of life in society»; furthermore they «have a profoundly moral significance because they refer to the ultimate and organizational foundations of life in society» (n. 163). The *Compendium* considers as values «truth, freedom, justice, love» (n. 197), that foster the authentic development of human being and his dignity. These are inherent to «the proper structuring and ordered leading of life in society» and suppose «both the practice of the fundamental principles of social life and the personal exercise of virtue» (*ib.*).

The Preamble of the Treaty of the European Union (2009) declares that it draws «inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law» [1) a)]. For her part, the *Charter of the fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2000) declares, «Conscious of its spiritual and moral heritage, the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law» (*Preamble*).

In that way we can perceive some kinds of correspondence and likeness between the three lists of values, even if do not lack differences. We are conscious that the contents of the values are not the same in the quoted official documents, but this

correspondence is enough to leave space to assess the liaison between the Christian values and those at the basis of the European Union.

Discernment of Christian social teaching and moral fundament of values

Christian faith cannot be satisfied by this correspondence with European values, as it is interested in the actual good and integral development of individuals and of society as a whole.

In reality, the social teaching is a living organism, like society, which undergoes continuous changes. Acknowledging these changes requires a watchful eye that interprets what happens and it is able to see what is necessary to do. This is what we call discernment. In the last decades, we can observe how the Catholic *magisterium* has monitored the transformations of our society, as recently demonstrated by the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis *Laudato si'* (2015) and the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* (2023). From them it is evident the outlining of the economic consequences of the environmental pollution. Condemning this phenomenon and inviting people in charge of public life to take the necessary measures and at the same time, conveying to common citizens the need for a different lifestyle, are ways that can lead to a change in this area of social life.

For that reason, the discernment is a kind of process never completed. Thanks to the discernment, popes, bishops and theologians promote an inexhaustible reflection and research on social matters, while all principles and values are continuously investigated and progressed. This was the case, for example, of the encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* of Pope Paul VI, who analysed the social situation of poor populations and asked wealthy nations to take the responsibility and the commitment to promote their development. This was a real progress, as it is the case also for the quoted documents of Pope Francis about integral ecology and the care of common home that is the Earth. In this way, social teaching of the Church brings to universal attention a serious problem that has not yet been adequately acquainted.

Undoubtedly, this is of the most importance, because public opinion gives yet some audience to the word of the Church. Nevertheless, what seems to lack is the most important thing, i.e. that values are actually recognised and appreciated in the way declared by the *Compendium*, as «the personal exercise of virtue». Until this personal exercise is ignored by the moral vision of a civil community, both national and European, if not even held in contempt, the “value” of the values will be very frail.

Values and ethos

An important consideration leads us to the question that has been sharply pointed out by Wolfgang Böckenförde with his so-called dilemma, i.e. «secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself». Who can guarantee these prerequisites? Certainly not the Church, neither the single citizen. However, their combination can reach some success. What is strictly necessary is that the word of the Church and of the faithful remains free to be proclaimed, and that Christian community gives testimony not only of religious practice but also of civic commitment and responsibility. All this tries to pursue endlessly those necessary prerequisites that held together faith, moral and ideal vision of reality in the light of God and of the Christian revelation. These roots will nourish ceaselessly common values and will

enable everyone to respect and practice them as ultimate prerequisite for a society ruled by a common *ethos*.

Values in act

We can also refer to the enormous activity of Church institutions like Caritas to exhibit the concrete initiatives taken to counteract the aftermaths of the economic crisis that is affecting many people in our societies, with poverty and deprivation. Moreover, the research carried out, not only in recent times, about the organisation of the economic mechanisms that ultimately rule social life deserves to be mentioned. An idea of economy focused only on the profit of the capitals leads to the enormous contrasts that our societies experience more urgently each day between the very few with a huge wealth and those who suffer hunger and misfortune. The economy has the opportunity to be inspired by the principles of Christian social teaching; that is the case of the social market economy and the civil economy. We have something to say about this kind of matters, even if we as Church must not be involved in direct social and political responsibility.

Subsidiarity and populism

An important principle in the perspective of Catholic social teaching is that of subsidiarity, which concerns the intermediate social groupings and, more in general, all the spontaneous expressions of civil society. This is an issue of real interest in this time because many forms of populism are affecting us. Populism is based on a relation – or supposed relation – between governments and people without any kind of social mediation. In this way, governments occupy all the political space, while people are left at the mercy of everyone, in a perfect insulation, which today has a precise name: individualism. One of the effects of this situation is also economic. In fact, the individual is more and more an intended victim of the market, a mere consumer. Great companies are increasingly carrying out economic activity of entrepreneurship and trade. What is lacking though is the due space for many individuals to undertake an economic activity. But we must not forget that the economic freedom is a sign of the level of real freedom in a society.

The mission of COMECE

A special observatory of the Catholic social teaching, not only on economy, is COMECE, by whom that teaching is continuously applied to all the matters dealt with by the European Commission and others European institutions. It has at his disposal a knowhow acquired along more than forty years on the values involved in the activity of the European Institutions. The contents of official documents as well as of many kinds of issues are regularly subject to consultation. The dialogue that is regularly held is a way for the Church to intervene and express the Christian vision of the values at stake in this time. This is an institutional way to let Christian values be known and point them out to the attention of the European institutions. However, we know that the Church and the faithful can contribute in various manners to the knowledge and the spreading of Catholic social teaching.