

## THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH\*

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### SUMMARY

Since the end of World War II leading political scientists have increasingly understood democracy as a means, procedure, or method. This understanding of democracy was powerfully advanced by Joseph A. Schumpeter in his book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, published in 1942, and lives on in such recent works as Samuel P. Huntington's *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, published in 1991. Understanding democracy as a means has certain intellectual advantages, but that is not, in fact, how the actual leaders of many modern democracies have understood – and fought for – it. Rather, they have generally valued democracy as integral to the public or common good, and, as often as not, have pursued democracy as both a method and a mission inextricably linked to human rights. Recent studies by Robert D. Putnam and other leading political scientists can be read to suggest that understanding – and valuing – democracy as both a method and a mission is a necessary but insufficient condition for establishing the norms of reciprocity and civic engagement that make democracy work. Finally, the history of representative democracy in the United States, including the role of religious ideas and ideals, suggests that those who understand and value democracy only or mainly as a means are unlikely in the end to achieve what Pope John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), termed “authentic democracy”.

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\* In the programme the subject of this paper was “Value and Justification of Democracy”. Professor Di Iulio presented his paper under the title “Democracy: An End or a Means?”. For this volume Professor Di Iulio delivered a revised version bearing the above title.

*Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person.*

Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), 46

There are at least three large, complex, and overlapping questions to be raised about contemporary democracy in relation to the Catholic Church:

Conceptually, is “democracy” best defined and valued as a means, an end, or both, and how does the Catholic Church now conceive it?

Empirically, what, if any, social and other conditions are generally most favorable to democracy and what, if anything, has the post-1970 Catholic Church done to foster those conditions?

Morally, what, if any, special capacity and responsibility do Catholics have to protect and promote what Pope John Paul II has termed “authentic democracy” both at home and abroad?

My main purpose in this paper is to outline preliminary but pointed answers to these three questions, and to do so in a way that provokes the critical interest of social scientists, moral philosophers, Catholic theologians, political leaders, and others from whose diverse expert knowledge and mutual dialogue might result a more definitive conceptual, empirical, and moral understanding of contemporary democracy in relation to the Catholic Church. My corollary purpose in this paper is to indicate that over the last several decades the Catholic Church has played a major and positive role in protecting and promoting democracy around the globe, and that this role springs naturally from official contemporary Catholic Church teachings.

#### DEFINING AND VALUING DEMOCRACY

One of the most widely used introductory political science textbooks in the United States conceives democracy as follows:

Here we define democracy as both ultimate ends and instrumental means, both as *goals* basic to humankind and as a *method* – for example, free and fair elections – best calculated to realize those human goals. The means and the ends, the goals and the method, are closely interrelated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James MacGregor Burns, J.W. Peltason and Thomas E. Cronin, *Government by the People*, ninth edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 9. Italics in the original.

Both in the United States and elsewhere, however, more advanced scholarship conceives democracy as a means, not as an end. The most influential scholarly argument for conceiving democracy primarily or solely as a means was made by Joseph A. Schumpeter in his classic study, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, the first edition of which was published in 1942.

Schumpeter has been widely cited for his ideas about capitalism's "process of creative destruction" and his (as it turned out false) predictions about "perennial inflationary pressure" and the triumph of predominantly socialist economies over predominantly capitalist ones.<sup>2</sup> Today, however, it is his ideas about "the democratic method", not his ideas about "the march to socialism", that continue to have real intellectual currency:

Democracy is a political *method*, that is to say, a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political – legislative and administrative – decisions and hence incapable of being an end in itself, irrespective of what decisions it will produce under given historical conditions ... (B)eing a political method, democracy cannot ... be an end in itself.<sup>3</sup>

Setting aside the "classical theory" in which democracy is conceived as intrinsic to "the common good", Schumpeter declared that "the role of the people is to produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a government, or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government":

And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.<sup>4</sup>

Schumpeter hoped that his definition of democracy as a procedure for promoting "competition for political leadership" would soon be accepted as *the* definition of democracy among serious "students of politics".<sup>5</sup> He did not hope in vain.

Consider, for example, how democracy is conceived in one of the most widely-debated recent works on the subject by an internationally recognized political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington's *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, which was published in 1991.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, third edition (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1962), see especially chapter 7 and pp. 415-425.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242. Emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Huntington, a Harvard University professor and past president of the American Political Science Association, credits Schumpeter with “(e)ffectively demolishing” previous concepts of democracy:

For some while after World War II a debate went on between those determined, in the classical vein, to define democracy by source or purpose, and the growing number of theorists adhering to a procedural concept of democracy in the Schumpeterian mode. By the 1970s the debate was over and Schumpeter had won ... Sweeping discussions of democracy in terms of normative theory sharply declined, at least in American scholarly discussions, and were replaced by efforts to understand the nature of democratic institutions, how they function, and the reasons why they develop and collapse. The prevailing effort was to make democracy less of a “hurrah” word and more of a commonsense word.<sup>6</sup>

“The procedural approach to democracy”, Huntington avers, “accords with the commonsense uses of the term. We all know that military coups, rigged elections, coercion and harassment of the opposition, jailing of political opponents, and prohibition of political meetings are incompatible with democracy”.<sup>7</sup> For future “democracies to come into being”, he argues, “future political elites will at a minimum have to believe that democracy is the least worst form of government for their societies and for themselves”.<sup>8</sup>

Huntington is right, but, as with many a powerful and worthwhile concept, the “procedural” concept of democracy as a means or method obscures even as it elucidates and loses in generality what it yields in precision.

How well, for example, does the procedural concept of democracy comport with the actual words, deeds, sentiments, and motives of the political and religious leaders and ordinary persons all across the globe who have spoken out, struggled, and sacrificed to oppose military coups, establish free and fair elections, institutionalize legitimate party competition, encourage freedom of association, and otherwise institutionalize the rule of law? Historically, have all or most of those who have started or sustained democracy understood it mainly or solely as a procedure for institutionalizing legitimate, non-violent political competition, “the least worst form of government”, a political ticket to economic growth, or a way to serve themselves? Or have many or most such leaders, including many of the last three decades, defined and valued democracy as integral to what

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 6, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

James Madison, the chief architect and defender of the United States Constitution and hence of America's representative democracy, variously termed "the permanent and aggregate interests of the community", the "true interest" of the people, "the good of the whole", and "the public good"?<sup>9</sup>

Consider what Huntington himself observes about the crucial post-1974 role of religious leaders and organizations in advancing democracy. Citing the *1988 Catholic Almanac*, Huntington quotes Pope John Paul II "(c)onfronting Pinochet in Chile in 1987" as follows: "I am not the evangelizer of democracy; I am the evangelizer of the Gospel. To the Gospel message, of course, belong all the problems of human rights; and, if democracy means human rights, it also belongs to the message of the Church".<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Pope John Paul II, Catholic clergy, and other religious leaders were hardly alone in defining and valuing democracy as inextricably tied to "human rights". Over the last several decades, a wide variety of secular leaders from Chile to Czechoslovakia, from Panama to Poland, from South Korea to South Africa, have pushed for democracy. Surely, the efforts they made in the name of democracy were not wholly or even mainly in the spirit of self-interested bets on democracy's potential as a means for reducing social strife, improving economic performance, or securing power or wealth for themselves.

Rather, for many of these leaders, even for the most worldly and calculating among them, democracy was no doubt understood and experienced as a "hurrah" word. In many cases, their struggle for democratizing reforms, while in the nature of things often taking shape as a game of political alliances, bargaining, and coalition-building, was nonetheless a game they played with a genuine regard for democracy as necessary to the dignity of the human person. In many cases, their working definition of democracy was probably closer to the transcendent concept of "authentic democracy" than it was to the technical concept of "procedural democracy".

Thus, while contemporary scholars have fruitfully defined and studied democracy as a means, method, or procedure, we ought not thereby to lose sight of the reality that many contemporary leaders, both secular and religious, have defined, valued, and pursued democracy as both a method and a mission. As is discussed below, the Catholic Church itself has

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<sup>9</sup> James Madison, Federalist Paper Number 10, in Clinton Rossiter (ed.), *The Federalist Papers* (New York, Mentor, 1961), pp. 78, 80, 82.

<sup>10</sup> Huntington, *op. cit.*, p. 84, citing Felician Foy (ed.), *1988 Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, Indiana, Our Sunday Visitor Books, 1987), p. 34.

conceived and promoted democracy as both instrumental and intrinsic to the formation and maintenance of polities that respect the dignity of the human person and need for human community.

#### EXPLAINING AND EXPANDING DEMOCRACY

Since the end of the Second World War, political scientists and scholars in other fields have made tremendous progress in identifying the conditions under which democratic political institutions arise, persist, and change. One of the leading analysts of democracy, Charles Tilly of Columbia University, has recently and succinctly summarized what decades of empirical research indicates about “possible mechanisms of democratization”:

Not just one, but multiple paths to democracy exist. Most large-scale social environments that have ever existed and the majority that exist today include major obstacles to democracy ... If democratization occurs, the process does not take place on the scale of millennia ... or on the scale of months ... but at a scale between, most likely over years or decades. Democratization has rarely occurred, and still occurs rarely, because under most political regimes in most social environments major political actors have strong incentives and means to block the very processes that promote democracy. Prevailing circumstances under which democratization occurs vary significantly from era to era and region to region as a function of the international environment, available models of political organization, and predominant patterns of social relations.<sup>11</sup>

While Tilly is right that democracy has been, and continues to be, rare, he and other leading empirical researchers and theorists of democracy have made numerous efforts to explain the post-1974 global expansion of democracy. For example, Seymour Martin Lipset, Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University in the United States, has been a leading student of democracy for nearly a half-century. In his most recent series of public lectures on “the preconditions of democracy”, Lipset offered the following observation:

In the past two decades, democracy has spread throughout the world for the first time in human history. It is hard to recall, but just a few years ago the overwhelming majority of the members of the United Nations were not democratic. By 1996 ... 118 of the 190 (member) nations (had) competitive elections and various guarantees of political and individual rights, a figure which is more than double the number from twenty-five years earlier. Despite the proliferation of

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Tilly, ‘Defining Democracy’, *Public Affairs Report*, University of California, Berkeley, May 1998, p. 4.

democracies, it is still important to inquire why free polities are taking root in some nations and not in others and why they took place in some earlier than elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Lipset considers a wide range of economic, cultural, religious, and other factors that may have contributed to the post-1974 expansion of democracy worldwide. In the course of his analysis, he notes that, “(h)istorically, democracy has not done well in countries dominated by Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Confucianism”.<sup>13</sup> But what is most striking about the latest wave of democratization, he suggests, is how the “inverse relationship between democracy and Catholicism has largely disappeared”:

Catholicism changed after World War II in ways that positively affected the potential for democracy. It has become more accepting of religious and political pluralism, has forbidden the clergy to engage in electoral politics, and has grown more approving of social reform to reduce inequality.<sup>14</sup>

In his aforementioned book, Huntington, whose explanations of political development have rarely been at one with those of Lipset, makes a virtually identical case about contemporary Catholicism and contemporary democracy. He explores the global fortunes of democracy during the period 1974 to 1990, identifying some thirty-three instances of democratization and three instances of “democratic reversal”.<sup>15</sup> He estimates that in 1990 some 58 of the 129 countries with a population of more than one million were “democratic states”.<sup>16</sup> He attempts “to explain why, how, and with what consequences a group of roughly contemporaneous transitions to democracy occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and to understand what these transitions may suggest about the future of democracy in the world”.<sup>17</sup>

Huntington’s analysis touches upon virtually every major body of contemporary social science theory about the conditions that foster or retard democracy. Like Lipset, he gives all schools of thought their due, and concludes that the Catholic Church has played a major and positive role:

In many countries, Protestant and Catholic church leaders have been central in the struggles against repressive countries ... All in all, if it were not for the ...

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<sup>12</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘1997 Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture in Representative Government’, *Extensions: A Journal of the Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center*, July 1998, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Huntington, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-30.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30

actions of the Church against authoritarianism, fewer third wave transitions to democracy would have occurred and many that did occur would have occurred later ... Catholicism was second only to economic development as a pervasive force making for democratization in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

Other informed observers including non-academics have reached much the same conclusion. For example, Adrian Karatnycky, president of a U.S.-based research organization called Freedom House, has noted that “dictatorship has been virtually eliminated in countries with a Catholic majority”:

When Karol Wojtyła acceded to the pontificate, 22 of 42 countries with a Catholic majority were tyrannies. Most of these dictatorships have now collapsed ... In fact, Catholicism’s democratic influence now reaches beyond Catholic countries. For example, Catholic activism in support of democracy played a central role in South Korea ... There are other factors — including the growing transparency of borders, innovations in technology that increase access to information, and the emergence of robust middle and working classes — that have helped propel the remarkable march of democracy ... But there is no question that the Pope’s teachings on human rights and freedom of association ... have played a central role in the democratic wave of change.<sup>19</sup>

All true, but there are at least three reasons to qualify and refine this understanding of the Catholic Church’s role in expanding contemporary democracy.

First, there have been, and continue to be, “democratic reversals” and stunted democratic reforms in both Catholic and non-Catholic countries.<sup>20</sup>

Second, a new generation of quantitatively sophisticated analyses suggest that economic prosperity, independent of religious or other influences, is an even more powerful predictor of both levels of democracy and rates of democratization than most previous analyses had suggested.<sup>21</sup> Even if, as Huntington argues, the Church’s role was “second only to economic development”, it might well be a distant second.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 85. Huntington also credits the Church with supporting opposition groups that “pursued democracy through nonviolent means” and vigorously espousing nonviolence, which, he argues in turn, largely explains the (by historical standards at least) “low levels of violence in these regime changes” (pp. 196, 200-201).

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Karatnycky, “Democratic Church”, *National Review*, May 4, 1998, pp. 38, 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Kurt Weyland, *Democracy Without Equity: Failures of Reform in Brazil* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996); Mark Falcoff, ‘Paraguay: The Tail End of the Democratic Revolution’, *American Enterprise Institute Research Brief*, Washington, D.C., June 1998.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Robert J. Barro, *Determinants of Economic Growth: A Cross-Country Empirical Study* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1997).



Third, arguably the single most influential recent book on democracy is Robert D. Putnam's *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, published in 1993. Putnam, a Harvard professor of political science, examines the experiment begun in 1970 when Italy created new governments for each of its regions. He analyzes the records of these governments in such fields as agriculture, housing, and health services. His analysis offers compelling empirical evidence for the importance of "civic community" in developing successful democratic institutions:

Some regions of Italy have many choral societies and soccer teams and bird-watching clubs and Rotary clubs. Most citizens in those regions read eagerly about community affairs in the daily press ... Inhabitants trust one another to act fairly and to obey the law. Leaders in these regions are relatively honest. They believe in popular government, and are predisposed to compromise with their political adversaries. Both citizens and leaders here find equality congenial ... The community values solidarity, civic engagement, cooperation, and honesty. Government works.<sup>22</sup>

Putnam's book has been widely read by policy makers and civic leaders in the U.S. and other nations as powerful evidence that making democracy work requires "a substantial stock of social capital, in the form of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement" that can "improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions".<sup>23</sup> Metaphorically speaking, his thesis is that leaders can open and make the initial deposits in a democracy's bank of social capital, but for a democracy to remain institutionally solvent requires ongoing social contributions from both leaders and average citizens. Echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, he concludes that "(d)emocratic government is strengthened, not weakened, when it faces a vigorous civil society", and the ability of democratic institutions to help achieve other desirable ends is "facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens".<sup>24</sup>

If Putnam is even half-right, then the fact that southern Italy, a region of the world where the Church of Rome is indubitably a major presence, lags so in "making democracy work" might reasonably raise larger doubts about the Church's relationship to social capital, civil institutions, civic engagement, and democracy itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

## PROTECTING AND PROMOTING DEMOCRACY

There is, however, no doubting the positive role that the Catholic Church has played in the post-1974 global expansion of democracy. In a sense, this is “nothing new”. Historically, democracy has often been the offspring of active Christian belief. This has been true even in the experiences of a modern democracy such as the United States, a pluralistic polity in which the so-called doctrine of the separation of church and state has always had its adherents.

As Paul Johnson has noted in his provocative history of the American people, published in 1997, “(n)ext to religion, the concept of the rule of law was the biggest single force in creating the political civilization of the colonies”. Many of the country’s early democratic leaders argued that “the law was not just necessary – essential to any civil society – it was noble. What happened in courts and assemblies on weekdays was the secular equivalent of what happened in church on Sundays”.<sup>25</sup>

By the time of the debate over the U.S. Constitution, Madison and many other leaders had concluded that the only way to representative democracy work in America was, in effect, to trade strongly on the neo-democratic civic traditions of ever larger segments of the American people, and, in turn, to establish a large republic. As explained in the introductory American government textbook that I co-author with UCLA’s Professor James Q. Wilson, by “favoring a large republic, Madison was not trying to stifle democracy”:

Rather he was attempting to show how democratic government really works, and what can make it work better. To rule, different interests must come together ... (H)e was arguing that the coalitions that formed in a large republic would be more moderate than those that formed in a small one because the bigger the republic, the greater the variety of interests, and thus the more a coalition of the majority would have to accommodate a diversity of interests and opinions if it hoped to succeed.<sup>26</sup>

Madison and the other Founding Fathers of the American republic valued representative democracy as both symbol and substance of the rule of law, and, ideally, as a form of government under which the “whole society could seldom” come together or exert domestic force on “any other principles than those of justice and the general good”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> James Q. Wilson and John J. Di Iulio, Jr., *American Government: The Essentials* (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Madison, Federalist Paper Number 51, in Rossiter, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

Like most of the other American Founding Fathers and early defenders of representative democracy in the U.S., Madison was not a deeply religious person. But, as Johnson notes, Madison “saw an important role for religious feeling in shaping” and sustaining a democratic society.<sup>28</sup>

Madison believed that popular assumptions about the rights and dignity of the human person that can spring from a civil society’s religious traditions were vital to representative democracy. He was one in a long line of essentially secular political thinkers and analysts who have viewed the relationship between Christian belief and democratic government as morally and practically symbiotic.

James Bryce’s *Modern Democracies*, published in 1921, stressed the role of Christianity in Western democratization. “What, then”, asks Bryce, “is the relation to democracy of the fundamental ideas of the Gospel?”:

Four ideas are of special significance. The worth of the individual man is enhanced as a being to whom the Creator has given an immortal soul, and who is the object of His continuing care. In that Creator’s sight the souls of all his human creatures are of like worth. All alike need redemption ... Supremely valuable is the inner life of the soul and its relation to the Deity ... It is the duty of all God’s creatures to love one another, and form thereby a brotherhood of worshippers.<sup>29</sup>

The first of these ideas, argues Bruce, implies “spiritual liberty” and “freedom of conscience. The second implies human equality”, and the third and fourth ideas together imply an ideal of civic “brotherhood” which “points to the value of the collective life” and one’s moral obligations to others and to “the community”.<sup>30</sup>

Huntington, too, makes a case for the proposition that a “strong correlation exists” between Western Christianity and Western democracy. “The correlation”, he is careful to stress, “does not prove causation”.<sup>31</sup> Other religious traditions are clearly compatible with belief in “the dignity of the individual” and other democratic beliefs, norms, and values. But – or so I would argue – Christians, most especially Catholics, have a special historical and moral writ to protect and promote democracy in the future. As Huntington argues:

Democracy will spread in the world to the extent that those who exercise power in the world and in individual countries want it to spread ... History ... does not move forward in a straight line, but when skilled and determined leaders push, it does move forward.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> James Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, vol. 1 (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1921), p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Huntington, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

For over two decades now, the “skilled and determined leaders” of the Catholic Church have done much to protect and promote democracy in accordance with the Church’s own official teachings – its teachings not only on democracy itself,<sup>33</sup> but on “human community,” including “the person and society”, “participation in social life”, and “social justice”.<sup>34</sup>

It is true that the “magisterium of the Church was slow to speak about democracy and did so even then with considerable circumspection, if not suspicion”.<sup>35</sup> It is also true, however, that the Christian ideas that are most often identified as moral springboards of democracy (most especially those that turn on organic conceptions of “collective life”) have discernibly Catholic intellectual roots.

Finally, while it is true that many early efforts to advance democracy were more orphans than offspring of the Church, that should not blind one from recognizing that the Church has demonstrated a unique capacity and willingness to articulate, protect, and promote “authentic democracy” in the contemporary era, or from voicing rational moral hopes that it will continue to do so into the next century and third millennium.

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<sup>33</sup> For a most useful summary see Michel Schooyans, ‘Democracy in the Teaching of the Popes’, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Proceedings of the Workshop on Democracy*, December 12-13, 1996, pp. 11-40.

<sup>34</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994), pp. 459-472.

<sup>35</sup> Schooyans, *op. cit.*, p. 11.