



Nation, State, Nation-State



Plenary Session 1-3 May 2019 | Concept Note – The world is facing today a growing threat of nationalist revival. Exclusivist national ideology leads to mutual rejection and enduring conflicts. Yet humanity has learned from its history that nations can coexist, cooperate and prosper together when they put their potential in common.

There is no universal definition of a nation. Everybody would agree that peoples with common ethnic roots, language, religion, historical memory and the explicit desire to act as a political unity make up a nation. But not all nations do vest the form of a sovereign territorial state. Nor are all states national states. So nation can be understood as having a double meaning: nation as a people emerging in history and conceiving itself as a political subject, and nation as a political and ideological construction. This construction is often made by states that legitimize themselves as being the political form of the nation. Still, there are multinational states and nations without a state, and on the other hand, homogeneous nation-states do not really exist. They have all people of mixed origin, through immigration and exchanges with neighbour nations. Nearly all nation-states have national minorities within their territory.

The current theories of the state come from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century: one people, one government, one territory. The nation-state has become the paramount expression of sovereignty. The formal division of the world into sovereign nation-states leaves open two challenges: the national minorities in the state and the permanent rivalry between nation-states.

The territorial state may cooperate with others territorial states but remains the ultimate decision-making authority. Making a distinction between people, nation, state, and sovereignty could help evacuating the threat of aggressive nationalism. Some political leaders use to play with the national feeling of their people and build a hostile image of the other. This very common tendency continues to cause conflicts among nations.

The social doctrine of the Church gives radically new insights into international relations. The state is the legal order of a community that wants to live together. It is aimed at providing what we call the common good, i.e. the conditions which allow each human person to have access to all the material, cultural, and spiritual goods necessary for a dignified human life.

The Church draws on two inseparable principles that are bedded in the very dynamic of human history and go much ahead of current political practices, namely: the unity of humankind and the universal destination of the goods of the earth. These principles do not contradict but illustrate the fundamental Christian view according to which the human person and not the ethnic group or the nation or the national state is considered as the ultimate reference of all social organization.

In the present stage of its development, humanity disposes of all possible technical means to organize itself in a cooperative and peaceful way. Yet the minds are still shaped by stereotypes of exclusion of the “other”. We witness a worrying tendency of nations or nation states to close themselves, insisting on their supposed

interests. Globalization and migrations inspire the fear that nations could lose their cultural identity and their political independence.

The social doctrine of the Church stresses that a state, as a voluntary political construction, always has to be adjusted to the pursuit of a common good. When this common good goes beyond what a single nation-state may reach by itself, it is natural that it be pursued by supranational political bodies vested with appropriate sovereignty. Peoples may perceive themselves as belonging to a broader entity than a nation-state without being threatened in their national feeling.

The social doctrine considers that a legitimate authority must be able to serve the common good at all relevant levels. Challenges like ecology, particularly climate change, human trafficking, energy, defence, regulation of the globalized economy cannot be dealt with by competing sovereign national states alone. The European Union is an example of what could become a supranational state with precise and limited sovereignty in matters of European common good. The social doctrine of the Church calls this the principle of subsidiarity which does not destroy national autonomies but rather protects them from the illusion of exclusive state sovereignty.

Our conference wants to understand in detail why nationalism became important in one specific historic phase of human history, what its presuppositions and consequences were, why after World War II supranational institutions became increasingly powerful, and why in the last years there has been a backlash against internationalism and a resurgence of nationalism. Historic case studies, systematic issues, and the challenge of the future will be interwoven in the lectures of the conference.