The Human Right to Full Participation in Society

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1. Participation and human dignity

In Catholic Social Teaching (CST), participation is considered under three aspects:

- As a need and a right inherent to human dignity
- As a right to take part in labour decisions
- As a right to take part in political life

Particular attention is given to the marginalized and poor people.

The first point is the most important. Why is participation coherent with the dignity of the human person? Human persons are fundamentally equal and enjoy the same rights. In society, at each level, responsibilities are diverse and complementary. Each man and woman must be treated as a person. Nobody is meaningless. Nobody may be treated as a means or as an object. In society two considerations must be held together: dignity and responsibility. In family life, in an enterprise, in governing a city or a state, those invested with natural or contractual responsibility care for the whole. They have to respond to those who entrusted them this care. In a family or at school, children are educated. Yet education is interactive and supposes a specific form of participation on behalf of those who are concerned. Children are not passive objects. In labour relations, employees are persons and not just passive forces of production. They make the enterprise successful. Management has to respond to shareholders who look for a return on their investments. Management cannot achieve its goals without some form of participation on behalf of the human workforce. In democratic societies participation is expressed through elections and ongoing debates in the public sphere.

Participation is related to democracy in political life, but not only. It excludes no sector of social life. At the same time it refers to complementary principles which frame participation in a global vision of person and society, person and common good, person and subsidiarity. The Social Teaching of the Church aims at giving a broad inspiration to reflexion on social issues. It does not entail a precise and unique model. It addresses all cultural and social contexts. It does not seek uniformity, but relies on a set of principles and values that give sense to all efforts that increase justice in human relations. A more participatory society is just a hint at envisioning a more human life. Participation exists in all societies in a huge variety of contexts.

Dealing with the issue of development, Vatican II recalled the principle that it should be a concern for all, not only for technocracy nor should it be left to the blind processes of the market. "Citizens should remember that it is their right and duty, which is also to be recognized by the civil authority, to contribute to the true progress of their own community according to their ability".[1]

In a message delivered to the International Labour Conference in 1982 on the dignity of human labour, John Paul II stressed that "any polity fostering the common good should appeal to participation of all social forces. He stressed: “Solidarity in society has to be built on a daily basis, first of all by ensuring the effective conditions of free participation of all to the common work”. [2] Participation is clearly linked to solidarity and the common good.

What is at stake in our concern is overcoming structural marginalization of people and finding new ways for integration. For a migrant, integration means fitting into a social context, which is different to one's own. For a disabled person, integration means having access to care, family life and work. For a poor person, integration means having a chance to find a dignified job on the labour market. Domestic situations that end in marginalization, like divorce, joblessness, and health issues, are also a call for new integration.

My first point is that participation is not optional. It is a request of the dignity of each human being. We consider that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights. We know that this is not yet universally accepted. Participation is a cultural product. There are many forms of participation. At the very root there is universal awareness that no human being can be treated as an object to another, that no community may be ruled out of society as a whole.
I cannot avoid mentioning participation in its specific Christian understanding. The New Testament provides us with a word that Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants all put at the basis of their ecclesiology, and this is koinonia, communion. The concept is fully Christian as it is rooted in the contemplation of the Holy Trinity. The very being of God is koinonia, sharing of divine life by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Koinonia is the eternal exchange of gifts between the three Persons. Now, what happens with Christ the Incarnate Son? He enabled us to enter into the divine koinonia, the divine life, and so to have a share of it. The whole salvation design is nothing other than an offer to participate in divine life. What is more, the Eucharist means to “partake of the table of the Lord” and participation in the body of the risen Lord. Participation (metechein) means our assimilation and transformation into the body of Christ (cf. 1 Co 10, 17.21).

Participation in this sense is an invitation that comes from above, a participation human beings would not have imagined or expected. Yet this specific participation is what finally matters. It outlines the fulfillment of our existence and the final goal of our journey. Participation in divine life begins now through the reception of sacraments and a life ordered with charity. Participation in divine life is a request of our spiritual nature. We need it and we cannot provide it by ourselves. It is a gift of graciousness. We may note that nobody is excluded from participation in divine life. The offer of salvation is open to all. It meets our freedom. We may refuse it. Participation, which implies an act of personal commitment, cannot be imposed.

A transposition of koinonia to our analysis of participation would mean that we understand participation as accepting a gift, something given, that we really need but that we may refuse.

As I have pointed out, the biblical roots of participation are a hint for our natural understanding and urge us towards more implication in fostering participation, but on a rational and disputable level. Participation is a natural request of the human person. It is not a religious program. For us Christians it is a request of natural reason inspired by faith, but it remains on the level of natural universal social order.

2. Forms of participation

Let us observe on which level of social organization participation is missing. All human persons belong to several concentric circles:

- The family
- The community of friends and the community of faith: participation in integrating and creating values, ways of life
- The city, the place of work, the State: participation in the economic and political life
- The international community: how do nations participate in the global game?

Participation obviously has a different meaning according to which level is considered. My point is that as you move from the centre to the universal level, participation is articulated into systemic constraints, which differ from one cultural context to the other.

The person is always and everywhere endowed with the need and the right to participate in all affairs that may concern him/her. Participation is not granted by society. Society has to recognize the right of persons to participate. How this request would be implemented receives differentiated answers.

Two movements create participation: one coming from the principles that we deem inscribed in the very structure of the human person. Without this conviction there is no given participation. The second movement goes bottom-up and relies on the principle of subsidiarity. This means that participation is not negotiable, but the construction in which participation will become effective is a matter of culture, political development, and economic conditions.

We cannot decide that participation means the same thing everywhere. It would be utopian and counterproductive. Participation grows from inside, from the awareness that it is good for human persons and society as a whole.

The main obstacle to participation is centralization, which suffocates any initiative at any level of responsibility. Subsidiarity belongs to the core principles of CST. It goes side by side with given participation. Some nations or cultures are naturally inclined to practice subsidiarity in the world of enterprise, political organizations and education. The experience of a federal state should be closer to subsidiarity than extreme centralization of decision-making. When subsidiarity is at hand, participation has a chance to become effective.

2a. Participation in the workplace

In the early industrial era, Leo XIII encouraged the creation of Christian trade unions in which employers and employees could deal with questions of wages, pension, and social justice. In these unions, workers could
defend their interests.[3] Leo also developed a theory of “just wages”. Salaries should cover the basic needs of all workers and their families and give them an opportunity to have some savings, giving them more autonomy. This part of the salary can be considered as participation in the profits of the enterprise. Access to some property is considered as a token of liberty.

Forty years later, Pope Pius XI observed: “Following in the footsteps of Our Predecessor, it will be impossible to put these principles into practice unless the non-owning workers through industry and thrift advance to the state of possessing some little property”. He concluded that employees and workers are called to have a share in the property of the enterprise, in its management and in its profits.[5]

Pius XI built the following principle: “It is entirely false to ascribe to the property alone or to the work alone whatever has been obtained through the combined effort of both, and it is wholly unjust for either, denying the efficacy of the other, to arrogate to itself whatever has been produced”. [6]

The connection between wages and profit is taken into consideration by John XXIII in Mater et Magistra in 1961. Collective bargaining between employers and unions is seen as a means of increasing participation of workers in decisions concerning their company. “In modern times we have seen an extensive increase in the number of workers’ associations, and their general recognition in the juridical codes of single States and on the international level. Members are no longer recruited in order to agitate, but rather to co-operate, principally by the method of collective bargaining... Hence it is not the decisions made within the individual productive units, which have the greatest bearing on the economy, but those made by public authorities and by institutions, which tackle the various economic problems on a national or international basis. It is therefore very appropriate, or even necessary, that these public authorities and institutions bring the workers into their discussions, and those who represent the rights, demands and aspirations of the workingmen; and not confine their deliberations to those who merely represent the interests of management”. [7]

He goes on to state, “We must notice in this connection the system of self-financing adopted in many countries by large, or comparatively large firms. Because these companies are financing replacement and plant expansion out of their own profits, they grow at a very rapid rate. In such cases we believe that the workers should be allocated shares in the firms for which they work, especially when they are paid no more than a minimum wage... Experience suggests many ways in which the demands of justice can be satisfied. Not to mention other ways, it is especially desirable today that workers gradually come to share in the ownership of their company, by ways and in the manner that seem most suitable. For today, even more than in the time of Our Predecessor, "every effort must be made that at least in future a just share only of the fruits of production be permitted to accumulate in the hands of the wealthy, and that an ample sufficiency be supplied to the workers". [8]

In his encyclical Laborem exercens, John Paul II elaborated on “the principle of the priority of labour over capital [which] is a postulate of the order of social morality. He deduced from that principle the necessity of assuring to employees a form of participation in property and management. “It has key importance both in the system built on the principle of private ownership of the means of production and also in the system in which private ownership of these means has been limited even in a radical way. Labour is in a sense inseparable from capital; in no way does it accept the antinomy, that is to say, the separation and opposition with regard to the means of production that has weighed upon human life in recent centuries as a result of merely economic premises. When man works, using all the means of production, he also wishes the fruit of this work to be used by himself and others, and he wishes to be able to take part in the very work process as a sharer in responsibility and creativity at the workbench to which he applies himself”. [9]

So it is clear that the many proposals put forward by experts in Catholic social teaching and by the highest Magisterium of the Church take on special significance: proposals for joint ownership of the means of work, sharing by the workers in the management and/or profits of businesses, so-called shareholding by labour...[10]

b. Participation in political life

By the end of the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII encouraged Catholics to use their right to participate in political elections. He even mentioned that it was a moral duty, as a way of contributing to the common good. Since the time of Vatican II, the issue has received considerable development. In his Encyclical Pacem in terris, John XXIII stated “A natural consequence of men’s dignity is unquestionably their right to take an active part in government, though their degree of participation will necessarily depend on the stage of development reached by the political community of which they are members”. [11]

Paul VI considered participation as a request of integral development: “The passing to the political dimension also expresses a demand made by the man of today: a greater sharing in responsibility and in decision-making. This legitimate aspiration becomes more evident as the cultural level rises, as the sense of freedom develops and as man becomes more aware of how, in a world facing an uncertain future, the choices of today
already condition the life of tomorrow. In *Mater et Magistra* Pope John XXIII stressed how much the admittance to responsibility is a basic demand of man’s nature, a concrete exercise of his freedom and a path to his development, and he showed how, in economic life and particularly in enterprise, this sharing in responsibilities should be ensured. Today the field is wider, and extends to the social and political sphere in which reasonable sharing in responsibility and in decisions must be established and strengthened. Admittedly, it is true that the choices proposed for a decision are more and more complex: the considerations that must be borne in mind are numerous and foreseeing of the consequences involves risk, even if new sciences strive to enlighten freedom at these important moments. However, although limits are sometimes called for, these obstacles must not slow down the giving of wider participation in working out decisions, making choices and putting them into practice. In order to counterbalance increasing technocracy, modern forms of democracy must be devised, not only making it possible for each man to become informed and to express himself, but also by involving him in a shared responsibility”.[12]

John Paul II came back to this issue. The sense of the State, as a political community, consists in that the society and people composing it are master and sovereign of their own destiny. “This sense remains unrealized if, instead of the exercise of power with the moral participation of the society or people, what we see is the imposition of power by a certain group upon all the other members of the society. This is essential in the present age, with its enormous increase in people’s social awareness and the accompanying need for the citizens to have a right share in the political life of the community, while taking account of the real conditions of each people and the necessary vigour of public authority”.[13]

3. New challenges

The classical doctrine of participation deals with participation at work and participation in politics. More recently a new field of research has appeared. It concerns marginalized people and migrants.

Poor and marginalized people are rejected from the benefits of participation at all levels. Often they do not benefit from social networks. They are marginalized for structural economic or personal reasons. Nobody can be deprived of his or her dignity, so society at large should be aware of the causes of marginalization and develop programs of reintegration.

CST has given more attention to participation of citizens in their homeland than to those excluded from access to work and those who have fallen out of the social network. Here participation means developing policies of integration through work and autonomy.

In his exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*,[14] Pope Francis devoted a long reflexion to “inclusion of the poor in society”. He called individuals and nations to work “to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor”. Among the new forms of poverty and vulnerability, the Pope mentions “the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly” and migrants, not forgetting the victims of human trafficking, persons exploited “in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, children used for begging”.

The key principle of solidarity has to be activated, “for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their life”. Among the structural causes of poverty Pope Francis mentions “the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation”. Economy “should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole”.

Among migrants, some are refugees and others are economic migrants. Most of them have left their country under the pressure of necessity. Most of them hope to be able to start a new life, if possible with their family, in a host country.

The issue many host countries are facing is multiculturalism understood as the presence of multiple cultural traditions within a single country. The challenge is not new but it is assuming broader dimensions among nations which ignored this phenomenon until recent times. In Europe, for instance, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire was a multinational and multicultural State comprising not less than 11 ethnic groups. But each group enjoyed a territorial basis. So Austria-Hungary was a federation of culturally-homogeneous member States. In Europe most countries were and are, like France, Nation-States.

We know the disastrous consequences of European nationalism. In our times States like Australia or Canada foster immigration and protect their various ethnic groups through a *Multiculturalism Act*. Multiculturalism is taught in public schools preparing young generations to mutual acceptation with no discrimination with regards to race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability or religion.

Australia defined itself as a multicultural country as early as 1972. But recent developments show that the issue provokes harsh debates. Police and emergency services personnel have received guidance on how to deal
with people belonging to specific religious affiliations, as religion may affect their contact with the public. In multicultural States, it is assumed that no specific cultural tradition should prevail.

The real issue lies with those States that have no multicultural tradition. Supposedly these States are homogeneous societies. Three kinds of answers are being given to the presence of minorities. The first has been abolished. It was racial segregation. Now, what remains is social integration and cultural assimilation.

What does integration mean? It has to be fundamentally distinguished from assimilation. Nationalistic ideologies admit strangers on the condition that they cease to be what they are and become what their hosts are. They are supposed to leave at the borders their language, their mentality, their way of life, and maybe their religion. Assimilation does not fit with the respect due to human dignity. A person who migrates to another country is not an empty shell. She/he has her own history, values, relationships, beliefs and hopes.

Integration is something different. It means: we take you as you are and we are ready to help you become a member of our community. This requires you to make a big effort of insertion, adaptation, and willingness to cooperate in your new life context. Most of the time a person who has been compelled to leave her native country would join nationals who are in the same situation. They will form a community within their new homeland. In Anglo-Saxon cultural areas this phenomenon is generally admitted. In other contexts, like France, “communitarianism” or “communalism” is strongly rejected by the entire political spectrum.

What does integration mean then? What do we propose with “social and cultural integration? In his important address to the international Forum on “Migration and peace” on February 21, 2017, Pope Francis gave a response to this challenge with four verbs: “to welcome, to protect, to promote, to integrate”. Integration comes as a conclusion of a process of careful attention to the situation of migrants. Integration is by no means assimilation or incorporation. It is not mutual isolation, but mutual cultural enrichment. “The peaceful integration of persons of various cultures” is given in the Catholicity of the Church, which could be regarded as a reference.

In matters of integration, there is no unique model. What we can expect is a deeper awareness of the needs of marginalized people and their right to be recognized in their dignity. Religious segregation is as intolerable as racial segregation. Yet, huge legal systems are built on those segregations.

In Europe the current trend goes in the direction of “monoculturalism”. After decades of enthusiastic attempts to promote mixed culture, countries like Netherlands, Denmark, United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain are coming back to integration through adoption of the dominant culture. The issue is not simple. On the one hand our capital cities are already “world-cities” with a mix of hundreds of nationalities. On the other hand, host countries doubt their survival as historical and cultural entities. Way of life, legislation, worldviews, and religion are intrinsically linked. The whole question is how these components of social life interact.

The only way to integrate without denying immigrants’ dignity consists in developing the distinctions which are fundamental to CST and which are behind the early philosophy of human rights. We start from the assumption that behind cultural diversity, there are fundamental needs and requirements, which are common to all human beings. Not all our humanity is a product of culture. Cultures grow on the common ground of human nature. I mention in particular:

- The sphere of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is to be considered as unalienable under all circumstances.

- In a multicultural context, moral normativity is to be found in our common humanity. Any coherent social group needs to share common values.

- Besides ethical values, each culture has developed specific legal systems as reflecting the relationships among their members. These systems, as long as they do not contradict natural law, have to be respected by immigrants. So immigrants must be ready, for instance, to learn the local language and adopt local customs. State and religious communities must be legally distinguished. Freedom of religion should care for integration.

In a word, there is no coherent society without communication among its members, without law equal for all, without basic human values. In some countries of the Middle East it is tradition that several family law systems may coexist according to which religious group a person belongs. This experience cannot be transferred as such to other legal systems.

To conclude, we have raised again the issue of natural law. We say, for instance, that monogamy and marriage of man and woman are natural law. We say that the Nation-State is not the ultimate horizon of human experience. Above single Nations we have Humanity as such sharing the goods of the earth and trying to find ways of peace. For us, not Babel but Pentecost is a symbol of full human participation in society.

[5] Id. 72.
[6] Id. 59.
[10] Id. 14,5.