DEMOCRACY IN DEBATE

HANS F. ZACHER

BACKGROUND

From the very beginning, Catholic Social Teaching has aimed at assisting Catholics in fulfilling their social duties. Beyond that, since the Second Vatican Council, the Popes address it to all men of good will. To strengthen this virtue, the Holy Father *es*tablished this Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

The Academy was founded in January 1994. The first Plenary meeting was held in December 1994. There was some brainstorming about the way it should work. The general task was clear. Its statutes speak of *the aim of promoting the study and progress of the social sciences.*

And they continue:

> The Academy, through an appropriate dialogue, thus offers the Church the elements which she can use in the development of her social doctrine.

How should that be done? Various solutions were tried experimentally. The Academy's first formal project was on 'The Future of Labour'. In this case, the work was ended by a discussion between the Academy's plenary and representatives of the episcopate. Beyond that, a selection of central texts presented during the Academy's meetings on 'The Future of Labour' was published. Thus the largest possible public was given the opportunity to understand the course of debate taken by the Academy.

The book introduced today shows another *one of the solutions* the Academy finally found and accepted to finish its work on a certain topic. It contains a *document which presents the essential results* of the Academy's discussions and *was adopted by the plenary of the Academy*. This document finishes the Academy's work on 'Democracy' – 'Democracy' having been the second project the Academy dealt with in a substantial way.

– *The next topics* were and are 'Globalisation', 'Intergenerational Solidarity' and 'The Conceptualisation of Men in Social Sciences'. A formal way of finishing these related sequences of work has not been decided yet.

– 'Democracy' was, when we started work in 1994/95, an *easy choice.* There were so many reasons for selecting it as a subject. Let me offer a list of the main aspects:

– There is the *relevance* of 'democracy' for the many *countries which have democratic constitutions.* What should their people know about the opportunities offered to them and their duties to keep 'democracy' working in th right way?

–But there are also many people who live under *regimes which merely claim to be democratic.* What should the people concerned feel about legitimacy and loyalty?

– There are so many *difficulties* in making 'democracy' succeed.

For *historical reasons*: in post-colonial, post-communist, post-fascist, post-authoritarian countries.

For *economic reasons*: if poverty is common and severe, or the difference in wealth is scandalous.

For *religious or ethnic reasons*: if groups consider themselves too different.

Or simply for *moral reasons*: if there is no initiative, no common sense, no readiness to cooperate or to care for oneself, one's own family or one's own neighbourhood.

– There are such *bitter experiences*: if *values* are disregarded, neglected or suppressed. Majority rule can be as inhumane as dictatorship. And the informal rule of masses can be more dangerous than both of them. But is tolerance a solution? Is pluralism a solution? Is there not only one truth? And can anything else be accepted but a complete cosmos of values deduced from that one truth?

– There is a very new necessity to discuss 'democracy': *Globalisation.* 'Democracy' has a history within the paradigm of particular states – normally called 'nation-states'. Now, transnationality and internationality have grown tremendously and are still growing. How can the values which may be materialised by 'democracy' be transferred to an international or transnational level? Or is globalisation simply and unavoidably a danger for 'democracy'?

Finally there is a very central reason for a Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences to study the problem of 'democracy': the *long history of strangeness*

between the Catholic Church and Democracy, the long and painful time of divorcing the marriage of throne and altar, the late 'yes' of the popes acknowledging 'democracy' as a worthwhile way of human government. But also in present times and in the future there is no guarantee that there will not be a conflict between Catholic values and 'democratic' policies, or between Catholic authorities and 'democratic' governments.

That was about the background for our decision to discuss 'democracy' and to look for Catholic insights and possible recommendations.

THE APPROACH

To *approach the subject* in 1996, a *preparatory workshop* was devoted to a worldwide view on the experiences and opinions. Then, in 1998 and 2000, *two plenary sessions* of the Academy were especially dedicated to the subject of 'democracy'.

On this basis, the Academy wanted to draw profit from the critical opinion of *external experts,* until then not involved in the Academy's work. These were professors *Sergio Bernal Restrepo* (from Rome), *Michael Novak* (from Washington) and *Rudolf Weiler* (from Vienna). That procedure ended in 2002 with a *final discussion* including the external experts as well as the Academy's plenary. On this basis, the *final document* was drafted. This final document restricts itself to conclusions *basing on the Academy's work*. That means, however, not only the discussions and publications which were explicitly arranged under the title of 'democracy'. The final document reflects also the whole work of the Academy as far as it, in some way or other, refers to the topic of 'democracy'. It was *approved in the Academy's plenary meeting of 2004*.

The book forwarded here embraces
– the reports of the external experts,
– the final discussion of the Academy's plenary with these experts, and
– the final document.
But my remarks will concentrate on the final document.

THE FINAL DOCUMENT

This document
– starts with an *introduction*, which besides of outlining the whole project concentrates on two subjects:

– The first one articulates the very central approach of the document: Democracy is a *responsibility*.

– The second one concerns the central question which arises with principally all Catholic discussions on democracy: The *tension between the discernment of truth and the endeavour of a democratic community* of people *with different standpoints of truth* – people denying truth, people convinced of different 'truths'.

– The *second part of the final document* examines *the relationship between democracy and values*. 'This is' – the document says – 'the most profound and, not rarely, the most painful Catholic concern'.

– *Democracy* has time and again *betrayed central Christian values*.

– On the other hand, does not democracy offer the *greatest possible opportunity for Christians to convince* others of 'their' values, to promote the voluntary acceptance of these values, and *to enable others* to live 'their' values in freedom?

– And are not *elementary values like self-determination, participation, responsibility and equality already inherent in democracy?*

– The *third part of the final document* deals with the problem of *civil society.* Democracy cannot succeed without the *dialectic between governmental and legal structures* on the one hand and a *free vibrant civil society* on the other.

– The *self-determination promised by the term 'democracy'* cannot be implemented merely through participation in governmental structures and procedures. The more important act of implementation occurs via the freedoms fostered by a democratic society.

– Nor can the *common good promised by the term 'democracy'* be produced by the government alone. The common good is only possible as a joint achievement of government and civil society.

– The *forth part* takes up the relation between democracy and the manifold *transnational movements and interactions, supranationality, international cooperation and organisation*. This topic is closely related to the *globalisation* process. National democracy has lost and is still losing ground, whereas transnational, supranational and international processes and institutions increasingly take over their functions or influence the functions of national democracies. Is it not necessary to transpose the merits of democracy to a transnational, supranational and international level? Many ways have already been gone. There are successes and failures. To find more morally convincing, legally reasonable and politically promising ideas, it is necessary to mobilise competence, consciousness and responsibility.