Plenary Session on The Uses of Power

Legitimacy, Democracy and the Rewriting of the International Order

The path to peace demands hearts and minds trained in concern for others and capable of perceiving the common good in today's world. For the road to peace involves everyone and leads to the fostering of right relationships between all living beings. As [John Paul II] pointed out, peace is an indivisible good; it is either everyone's or no one's (cf. [Sollicitudo rei socialis], 26). It can truly be attained and enjoyed as a reality of life and integral development only if there exists in people's consciences "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good". Address of his Holiness Pope Leo XIV to the Movements and Associations of the "Arena of Peace", May 30, 2025)

CONCEPT NOTE

In 1998 and 2000, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences devoted two plenary sessions to analyze democracy in its various modern forms. In those years, democracy seemed an inescapable horizon for all civilized countries. Three decades later, the situation is no longer the same. In the face of a changing world-landscape, which is witnessing the crisis of liberal democracies and the reshaping of the international order around diverse geopolitical interests, analyzing the fate of those democratic aspirations and, more generally, the moral foundations of political life become a pressing issue.

Catholic Social Teaching can be inspirational in this regard: it has always emphasized that

democracy is not morally self-subsistent, but depends on values which have its source in human dignity and should be politically preserved through a legal system attuned with natural law, which sets clear limits to political power and is in the service of the common good. Yet, CST leaves ample room to exercise judgment on the specific ways in which those principles should be applied in contingent, historical situations.

In this context, the purpose of this Plenary is to articulate a **broad, interdisciplinary reflection on the uses of political power, theories and perceptions of political legitimacy and the ongoing rewriting of international relations**.

Generically speaking, "**power**" -of which political power is a particular form- can described as the capacity to mobilize resources for any given end. This capacity can be based on persuasion/conviction, force/coercion and positive sanctions.

Insofar as it involves assembling wills around a common good, **political power** is first generated by persuasion, but, in order to secure political coexistence throughout time, it needs to be backed by coercive power and the ability to sanction infractions of the instituted political order. Hence, philosophers have sometimes distinguished between *constitutive power* -which is a process- and *constituted (institutionalized) power* (for instance, Spinoza distinguishes between "*potentia*" and "*Potestas*").

Given the normative ideal of basic equality, the fact that some exercise power over others needs some kind of justification. In distinguishing between *auctoritas* and *potestas*, the Roman republic pointed at the need that the exercise of power (*potestas*) took place within the moral domain; the medieval distinction between *tyrannus ex defectu tituli* and *tyrannus ex defectu exercitii*, also implied a distinction between political legitimacy and moral legitimacy. In modern history there have been different approaches to the origin and purposes of political power, which also are relevant to understand the sources of its **legitimacy**.

In addition to these normative theories, philosophers since Plato have also showed an interest in the **social and psychological origins of the tyranny**, which are relevant to reflect on the kind of **education** needed to prevent its emergence; and, in modern times, **sociology** also has pointed at the beliefs that people entertain about the legitimacy of a particular regime, as something relevant to explain political "domination" i.e. the probability that people will obey a certain command (Weber). Exploring the different ways in which people seek to participate and exercise power is the matter of **political science**.

Political domination, understood as government of free citizens, is clearly distinct from despotic domination. Yet, in order to avoid arbitrariness and really preserve political freedom, the **uses of political power** must be regulated according to reason and justice. This is the purpose of establishing a constitution, which secures division and balance of powers, a bill of rights, etc. The

rule of the law is, by all standards, a critical element in the configuration of a truly political space. Yet finding the balance between the prudential nature of political activity, which deals with contingent situations, and the normative and therefore universal requirements of the law has never been easy. In the last years we have been witnessing two conflicting movements which are symptomatic of a dysfunctional political system: both the politization of the judiciary, implicit in populism, as the judicialization of politics, implicit in technocracy, represent anomalies that endanger the pillars of **liberal democracy**.

As we know, liberal institutions preexisted democratic ideals, but the confluence of both elements in the previous century was generally thought a political achievement. For several decades, "**liberal democracies**" represented a kind of moral north for emerging nations: even if, in many ways, the economic development of such democracies -specifically the discovery of new markets- cannot be disentangled from the parallel history of **imperialism**, there is no doubt that liberal arguments (on freedom and the right to self-determination, for example) formed a part of the challenge to imperialism, and helped to destabilise **colonialism** in the early to mid-20th century.

Yet, this situation may be changing. On the one hand, both at the national and the international level, we are witnessing the persistent erosion of institutions that were supposed to set limits to the exercise of power. On the other, it seems as if the only admissible legitimation is the electoral one. The multiple sources of legitimation of power are lost in a very poor idea of democracy, reduced to the "**will of the people**" or the will of the majority, which, increasingly distrustful of all independent bodies, is easily prey to online disinformation or misinformation. All the complex multiple notion of democracy, rule of law, constitutionalism, fundamental rights and the like are overlooked: dialogue, compromise, deliberative processes are all recessive in front of the "will" of the people or of its symbolic leader. There is a belief that fundamental norms and rules should no longer limit the exercise of power (domestically and internationally) if they cut against the people's perceived interest, e.g., longstanding treaties are being called into question.

In an international context marked by mutual distrust, and struggle for economic resources, juridical arrangements introduced to secure internal political freedom can easily be thought to represent a weakness towards external powers. This is part of the reason why Kant thought that true respect for the law could not be secured in absence of an international federation of states, all committed to the advancement of peace. This idea was behind the establishment first of a League of nations, and then -after the WW II- of the United Nations, as well as the development of various international institutions.

Yet, presently, the **rules-based international order** appears to be retreating, as we witness a return to prewar power politics, with a rewriting of the norms regulating the world order, presumably to justify the erasure of sovereign nations, and arguably a new form of imperium. This evolution represents a challenge to liberal-democratic norms at the international level, and signals a regression from the ideas of global justice, global citizenship and cosmopolitanism that had

animated the political theory of just a decade or two ago. In this new context, Hegel's critique of Kant easily comes to mind:

"The Kantian representation of a perpetual peace through a federation of states that would arbitrate every dispute and settle every disagreement as a power recognized by all the individual states, and thus prevent a warlike solution, presupposes the agreement of the States, which would be based on moral or religious reasons, and always ultimately on the particular sovereign will, which would continue to be affected by contingency. Therefore, to the extent that particular wills do not reach an agreement, disputes between States can only be decided by war" (Philosophy of Right, § 333, 334).

Hegel was of the view that a federation of states could not be based on merely pragmatic or strategic reason, but would only be possible on moral or religious grounds. This, of course, does not mean that shared moral or religious principles would solve all political differences: despite shared moral principles, people can reasonably reach different political conclusions, because the latter also depend on rather contingent situations. Yet, shared moral principles, as well as reflection on our common origin and destiny, can certainly help in the way we deal with our otherwise inevitable differences, and, most importantly, on the decisions we make in order to prevent war.

As we see the advent of a new world order, it makes sense to reflect on the reasons and causes leading to the collapse of the old one. What have been the weaknesses and vices of that world order that left the door open to such deep and comprehensive reactions as we are seeing now? And, most importantly, what can we do in the present situation to secure justice and peace?

The Plenary will consist of three full days, the first will deal with power and legitimacy; the second with liberal democracy and its critics; and the third with the reshaping of the international order.