

Editorial

Democracy: Challenges Today and Theological Responses

Democracy can be said to be the “government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.”¹ As Abraham Lincoln has beautifully articulated, democracy is a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”²

Many nations follow democratic system. Compared to other systems, democracy can be said to be a popular and successful political idea and system. Perhaps, we do not have yet a better alternative for democracy. However, we are witnessing that over-politicization of democracy is resulting in its degeneration, denial of justice, favouritism, nepotism, uncontrolled corruption and corrosion of values. Democratically elected governments themselves often become the greatest violators of human rights. The legal system is not an exception. As a result, in many countries, democracy is no more the rule by the people, but the rule by a few politicians, often motivated by power and economic gain. In the last few decades, the way majoritarianism, populism, right-wing politics, fundamentalism, politics of identity, etc., are disrupting and degenerating the democratic system, causing destabilization within countries and at a global level, gives the impression that democracy has degraded into mobocracy and monocracy.

In general, in the democratic system, citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule. But if the majority is not inclusive, if it is not guided by the constitution that guarantees equal rights of all, it cannot be called democratic. Respecting the rights of all, especially

¹<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>

²<https://www.britannica.com/event/Gettysburg-Address>

the rights of minorities, is not a generosity of the majority; instead, equal dignity and equal right of every citizen is the corner stone of democracy. Moreover, political system should be founded on strong values, especially values of justice, equality, freedom, respect for the dignity of all, hospitality, compassion, and tolerance.

Political leadership in many countries has failed to tackle the degeneration of the democratic system. Rather, many in leadership are promoting tendencies of degeneration and are making strategies accordingly either to come to power or to stay in power. This also points to the need of renewed leadership to revive the ideals of democracy. As Pope Francis says, "...there is need for individuals and institutions capable of assuming a renewed leadership...We require a leadership that can help to find and put into practice a more just way for all of us to live in this world as sharers in a common destiny."³

The Church, though it is not a kingdom of this world, has the responsibility to ensure peace and well-being of people, to become the voice of the 'voiceless' who are denied justice and dignified life in the modern 'polis' of democracy. Unless a concern for freedom and justice in socio-political system enters our theological reflection, we will not be addressing the real problems that people have to face but may become passive and other-worldly onlookers.

Articles in this issue discuss the challenges that democracy faces in different parts of the world, and propose solutions rooted in Catholic Social Teaching. In an introductory essay, Kenneth R. Himes offers an overview of Church and democracy in the modern era by examining the Church's teaching on political democracy from the 19th to 21st centuries. Himes concludes that the "claim is not that democracy is always and everywhere the ideal form of government, but simply that it is most suitable for today." Christoph Stenschke argues that the New Testament makes an important contribution to the current understanding and discussion of human dignity and this vision has the potential to inspire churches everywhere. Taking up the question of human rights in the context of Covid-19, Vimal Tirimanna says that the social doctrine of the Church has something important to contribute to fill the lacuna of the one-sided Western liberal

³Francis, "Message of the Holy Father Francis to Participants in the Third International Conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church," in *Building Bridges in Sarajevo: The Plenary Papers from CTEWC 2018*," ed. Kristin E. Heyer, James F. Keenan and Andrea Vicini, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019, xv-xvi. See also, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180711_messaggio-etica-teologica.html.

interpretation of rights. According to him, for a democracy to function effectively, a balanced view of rights accompanied by the promotion of common good is necessary.

Mary Yuen examines from the perspective of the Catholic tradition the key elements of practicing democracy, giving Hong Kong's recent social movement as an example. She explains how people of Hong Kong participate in the democratic processes through diverse ways, and emphasises that in spite of the present crisis, it is important to move forward with hope and trust in democratic values. Eric Genilo O. Marcelo shows how the leadership of the Philippine Church uses a dual approach in political engagement. While speaking on social justice issues, the bishops use a terminology and mode consistent with the principles of Catholic social teaching, whereas speaking on issues related to human sexuality and family life, church leaders use a coercive approach. Genilo opines that this inconsistency has led to a diminished view of the moral authority of the Church and advocates to adopt a consistent approach recognizing the plurality of faiths in Philippine society. Pointing out that democracy in Africa is in a crisis, and politics has largely been sectarian, Elias O. Opongo expounds that disparities and increased poverty in the continent is a clear sign of the dysfunctionality of the democratic and economic systems. Opongo underscores that democracy should be based on the principles of common good and respect for human dignity, and shows how *Fratelli Tutti* can inspire us in this regard.

Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil explains that alliance of the ruling class with business magnates, majoritarianism, marginalization of truth, etc. lead to a deterioration of democratic values. He proposes that democracy can be protected by arousing a sense of responsibility in citizens and strengthening their sense of co-belonging. Roman Míčka, after giving an overview of the development of the social teaching of the Church on democracy, analyses a few relevant statements about democracy by Pope Francis. According to him, Pope Francis further develops the concept of democracy in the social teaching of the Church. Anish Mathew Palathinadiyil evaluates the concept of human dignity in the Indian democracy based on the present socio-political situation. Besides inviting our attention to biblical and theological foundations of human dignity, he proposes that Indian constitution should be regarded as a sacred book.

Bilju Vazhappilly appraises the appropriation of democratic components in different theological fields and in Church teachings. Following this, he points out the challenges in appropriating

democracy in theological endeavours today and affirms that democratic prospects play a vital role in doing theology publicly. Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa is convinced that despite its weaknesses, democracy still is the better form of government to adopt. His analysis is based on Amartya Sen's notion of democracy, and he proposes to ground Sen's notion of democracy on the vision of the dignity of the human person in the Catholic social tradition. Julian Saldanha explicates that the Church is naturally inclined to democratic practices. However, he does not hold that the Church has to model herself on any existing democracy; rather, the Church has to integrate into her practice democratic elements which enhance her already existing democratic nature. Though much has been achieved in this regard during the Post-Vatican II period, more still needs to be done. Virginia Rajakumari Sandiyagu gives an interesting example of freedom of speech and expression of women – of young daughters of Zelophehad in claiming for their right to property. She presents this as a biblical example of respecting the democratic rights of women, and also shows how the leaders were open-minded to listen to them.

Finally, Paulachan Kochappilly reflects on the miseries caused by Covid-19 and the mysteries of life it has unveiled.

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