

Emergent Democracy as a Moral Project for University Education in Mexico

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I. Introduction.

We will consider the promising impact the teachings of John Paul II about democracy may have in the future of Mexico's political and social institutions. Catholic University education is responsible for the transmission of the fullness of Catholic social doctrine on these topics. Mexico needs educated *Christian democrats*, determined to transform our Nation from within and face present challenges by means of moral convictions.

II. Global Trends and Threats Regarding Democratization.

The last two decades witnessed a new trend toward free elected governments all over the world. Few years before the "clash of civilizations", Samuel Huntington spoke about a "third wave"¹ of democratization as several countries engaged in democratic regimes. Significant figures of the whole process are given in the *Human Development Report 2002*: "In the 1980s and 1990s the world made dramatic progress in opening up political systems and expanding political freedoms. Some 81 countries took significant steps towards democracy, and today 140 of the world's nearly 200 countries hold multiparty elections –more than ever before"².

This "wave" reached Latin America also. In 1999, the Holy Father wrote in *Ecclesia in America*: "Among the positive aspects of America today, we see in civil society a growing support throughout the continent for democratic political systems and the gradual retreat of dictatorial regimes"³. One year after *Ecclesia in America*, Mexico eventually started its democratic life thanks to Vicente Fox's victory in the presidential elections on July 2nd, 2000.

¹ "The first wave had lasted from the American revolution until the breakup of empires at the end of World War I; the second followed from decolonization after World War II. Each of these waves was followed by an ebb tide as fascism spread over Europe in the 20's and 30's and Communism and forms of autocratic socialism took hold in the third world in the 60's and 70's", Joshua Muravchik, "Democracy's Quiet Victory", in *The New York Times* August 19th, 2002.

² UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 2002, p.1.

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, January 22nd, 1999, n.19.

Considering those facts, it is easy to claim democracy is conquering a *global and quiet victory* against totalitarianism, but the reality in many countries sadly suggests *actual democracy* is far from being a *universal norm*: “the euphoria of the cold war’s end has given way to the somber realities of 21st century politics. Developing countries pursued democratization in the face of massive poverty and pervasive social and economic tensions. Several that took steps towards democracy after 1980 have since then returned to more authoritarian rule: either military (...) or pseudo-democratic (...). Many others have stalled between democracy and authoritarianism, with limited political freedoms and closed or dysfunctional politics. Others (...) have become breeding grounds for extremism, and violent conflict”⁴. The state of affairs in *old democracies* is not a cheerful one, because in those countries: “citizen often feel powerless to influence national policies. They and their governments also feel more subject to international forces that they have little capacity to control”⁵.

Early this year in his *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, John Paul II expressed his concern that “in some countries of (Latin America) the persistence of social inequalities, drug trafficking, corruption and armed violence can endanger the foundations of democracy and discredit the political class”⁶. *Democratic governance* is fragile: success is not guaranteed, and it can succumb to hostile forces. To ensure the triumph of democracy, neither freely elected authorities, nor fair and reliable political procedures are enough. Democracy is “non simply certain electoral, legislative, executive and judicial procedures, but a way of public life characterized by equality before law, participatory decision-making, civility, justice, and a commitment to both individual liberty and the common good”⁷. Democracy needs the ground of a mature civic culture to bear it fruits, because it is not only a political agenda but also a *moral project*.

As University education plays an important role in the shaping of a Nation’s culture, we are obligated by office to form *democrats* From our schoolrooms must emerge not only skilled professionals, but good citizens. This is specially urgent in Mexico.

III. The Tribulations of Emerging Democracy in Mexico.

When Vicente Fox was elected President of Mexico, every Mexican thought our country entered the road of democracy. Technically, an electoral defeat ended the Mexican “Perfect Dictatorship” carried out for seventy years by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Even if on that date a very important change in Mexican Contemporary History did happen, it was not a *happy end*, but the beginning of a long-term process packed with challenges and opportunities.

⁴ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, p.1

⁵ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, p.1

⁶ John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, January 10th 2002, n.4.

⁷ George Weigel, *The Moral Foundations of Freedom. Acton Lecture on Religion and Freedom 2000*

The development of our emerging and limited democracy is in some sense threatened by the strong legacy of Mexican own *Ancient Regime*, which institutions, customs and ways of life are nevertheless thriving, and showing significant refusal to change. This tendency can be illustrated by the lingering and widespread corruption that undermines all levels of Mexican society. As the recently issued strategic analysis about Mexico from the European Union states: “These endemic problems are in good part responsible for the high level of crime and the importance of the drug trade. In addition to their harmful consequences for daily life, they also affect the economic interests of the country and constitute a threat to national security”⁸.

After our “Presidentialist” system collapsed –the President was the key character in Mexican politics–, the *republican division of powers* became *opposition of interests*. In the opening address of his government, President Fox tried to settle the new rules of the *governance game*: instead of a subordinate legislative to the executive power, the Congress approval was regarded as essential for implementing every bill put forth by the President. He said: “executive proposes, the congress resolves”, and we are tempted to add that in some cases the Justices decide, as the Supreme Court of Justice is recovering its preeminence as an actor in the democratic play.

Unfortunately, it has become a common practice for the federal powers to act against each other, in order to affirm their mutual “autonomy” For this reason several structural reforming proposals made by the executive, for instance the tax reform, the energy policy reform, the reform of the state, “are struggling, having been blocked by Congress, where the parties seem more interested in tactical fighting than in completing essential reforms”⁹.

Two years after the democratic change, there is an extended feeling of disappointment in Mexico as a result to the *crisis of governance* that our *democratic* authorities are giving signals of, deepened by the hard economical situation most Mexicans face in this “post-recessional” season, and the above mentioned problems as the high indexes of crime and drug trade.

IV. Implementing Democracy in Mexico.

Mexico needs urgently Mexicans able to set up a real democratic regime. Democracy is our hope, lest we want our country succumb to the exhausted forms of former absolutism. History teaches how prone to totalitarian regimes are troubled countries. Peoples in crisis consider freedom and civil liberties as a bargain for the illusion of economic stability and steady governance offered by dictators. *Democracy* is not a magic potion to solve any public calamity, but we are sure that it makes solutions easier.

⁸ European Union, *Country Strategy Paper: México 2002-2006*, p.5.

⁹ European Union, *Country Strategy Paper: México 2002-2006*, p.4.

But implementing democracy is a task concerning all society, and a so important issue that we cannot leave it to politicians alone. To be a *democrat* is a *moral ideal*, embodied by persons and communities, not only a *political choice*, as we said before. To make this *ideal a reality*, we can consider the teachings of John Paul II as a timely guide to give solid ground to our understanding of the democratic community, that we want for Mexico. We will consider only three principles, taken from several writings of the Pope.

a) Democracy Fits with the Moral Condition of the Human Person.

John Paul II explained in *Centesimus annus* that a correct vision of the human person is essential to build a just social order. He illustrated this point explaining that the collapse of socialism as an effect not only of economic and political factors, but also of its fundamental error which was “anthropological in nature”. In fact socialism “considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism. Socialism likewise maintains that the good of the individual can be realized without reference to his free choice, to the unique and exclusive responsibility which he exercises in the face of good or evil. From this mistaken conception of the human person arise both a distortion of law, which defines the sphere of the exercise of freedom, and an opposition to private property”¹⁰ But the human person cannot bear for a long time a situation of lack of freedom and property.

Nevertheless, the extreme forms of Western individualism, present in the majority of the countries with a long democratic tradition, bear also a distorted image of man, with moral and political implications as well. We are speaking about the exaltation “of the autonomous, unencumbered, sovereign Self”¹¹, that recognizes no law higher than individual willfulness.

“The great error of both collectivist determinism and of individualistic license is that their understanding of human freedom is detached from obedience to the truth”¹². For the Holy Father such severance is caused by the militant or practical atheism professed by both radical ideology¹³.

But atheism cuts the roots of human dignity, for “it is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity. Every individual must give this response, which constitutes the apex of his humanity, and no social mechanism or collective subject can substitute for it. The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.13.

¹¹ Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”, in *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16-21.

¹² Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”, in *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16-21.

¹³ “The atheism of which we are speaking is also closely connected with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which views human and social reality in a mechanistic way. Thus there is a denial of the supreme insight concerning man's true greatness, his transcendence in respect to earthly realities, the contradiction in his heart between the desire for the fullness of what is good and his own inability to attain it and, above all, the need for salvation which results from this situation”, *Centesimus annus*, n.13.

without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility. In contrast, from the Christian vision of the human person there necessarily follows a correct picture of society"¹⁴.

The *transcendent nature* of the human person, means at one time:

- a) The recognition of his eternal destiny.
- b) The moral individual struggle for a meaningful of life as an answer to God's call.
- c) The superiority of the person in confront with the State.
- d) The right every person has to form communities free of State control, in order to achieve his personal happiness and the common good of society¹⁵.

The respect for that *transcendent condition* of the human person, leads to a *democracy of ordered freedom*, expressed in the unconditional respect for human rights, which is unachievable outside the rule of law¹⁶. But the Holy Father points out that "there can be no rule of law, however, unless citizens and especially leaders are convinced that there is no freedom without truth (Cf. Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Europe, Declaration *Ut Testes Simus Christi Qui Nos Liberavit* (December 13, 1991), I, 1; II, 4; IV, 10; *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 13, 613-615; 627-633; 660-669)"¹⁷.

We can see here a virtuous circle: the fullness of truth about the human person is the real foundation for *democracy of ordered freedom*, because the recognition and respect of that truth are the bases for the rule of law and the respect of human rights.

Ordered freedom in a democratic society offers better opportunities for peoples and persons to "determine their destinies, express their views and participate in the decisions that shape their lives"¹⁸. By the respect of human rights, the rule of law, and the transcendent dignity of every person, *democracy* offers the right background for the State to promote a culture in the service of the person's response to transcendent truth: "man is understood in a more complete way when he is situated within the sphere of culture through his language, history, and the position he takes towards the fundamental events of life, such as birth, love, work and death. At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted"¹⁹. To put it positively: when the State is at the service of the person's response to transcendent truth, the culture and the moral life of nations are improved. But this is only possible in democratic regimes.

b) Democracy Depends on Moral Values.

As a consequence of the former considerations, we can state that democracy is not

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 13.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.13

¹⁶ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 19.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 19.

¹⁸ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, p.1

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.24.

neutral in the field of values. The Holy Father told America at the end of his Pastoral Visit in 1995: “Democracy needs wisdom. Democracy needs virtue, if it is not to turn against everything that is meant to defend and encourage. Democracy stands or falls with the truths and values which it embodies and promotes”²⁰.

In *Centesimus annus* he devoted to this topic a long reflection: “Authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the “subjectivity” of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism”²¹.

This paragraph is timely pertinent to Mexican situation, because the academic elites interpret separation between Church and State as the abolition of religion and religiously grounded morality from public life. The liberal intellectuals dogmatically preach that nobody has the privilege to impose their religious convictions to others, that Christians must left behind their beliefs when they engage in public functions. Obviously, this “Christian beliefs” are the respect for life, religious freedom, a reverent vision and life styles concerning human sexuality.

We should forsake our creed, but they are not obliged to. Even more, they are allowed to impose their dogmas to the people, and they are entitled to because they are the *people*, they represent “Progress”, “Enlightenment”, “Autonomous Reason”.

We should disclose the hidden fallacy this reasoning bears inside. The Christian vision of the human person is not a fundamentalist position. It can be shared by all people of good will who accept the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* The respect of human rights is not superstition, nor “Catholic prejudice”, but recognition of the dignity of the human person.

To ignore this reality “means the separation of the deepest convictions of the people from politics, which means the end of democracy and, in fact, the end of politics”²², for two reasons: first, democracy means “representation”, and to whom represents the promoter of violations of human dignity as constitutional rights? Second, to attempt against human

²⁰ John Paul II, *Address at Baltimore-Washington International Airport*, October 6th, 1995.

²¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 46.

²² Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”, in *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16-21.

rights damages the rule of law.

In effect, John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia in America*: “the grave problems which threaten the dignity of the human person, the family, marriage, education, the economy and working conditions, the quality of life and life itself, raise the question of the rule of law”(Propositio 72). The Synod Fathers rightly stressed that “the fundamental rights of the human person are inscribed in human nature itself, they are willed by God and therefore call for universal observance and acceptance. No human authority can infringe upon them by appealing to majority opinion or political consensus, on the pretext of respect for pluralism and democracy”²³. Christians should be disposed to dialogue, for they must be ready to give reason of his hope to anyone who asks for²⁴. That means Christians must be able to dialogue about any moral or social topic, but it does not imply that respect for human dignity is subject to majority consensus.

c) Democracy Contributes to Human Development Encouraging Civic Participation and Responsibility.

The *Human Development Report 2002* establishes an indissoluble link between development and democracy: “Advancing human development requires governance that is democratic both in form and substance—for the people and by the people”²⁵. The same idea is expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: the common good implies three essential elements: respect for the human person, social well-being and development, and peace²⁶. Development is in some sense “the epitome of all the social duties”²⁷.

Development and the common good is not only competence of the State, but of all society. “According to *Rerum novarum* and the whole social doctrine of the Church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good. This is what I have called the “subjectivity” of society which, together with the subjectivity of the individual, was cancelled out by “Real Socialism”(Cf. Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 15, 28: *loc. cit.*, 530; 548ff.)”²⁸

Linked to the “subjectivity of society” is the doctrine of subsidiarity, which in *Centesimus annus* John Paul II “infuses with new vitality”²⁹. The subjectivity of society implies a limited state, and therefore is possible only in a free democratic society, that recognizes and custodies “the human person, who must obey God rather than men (cf. Acts 5:29), (...) the family, the various social organizations (...)— all of which enjoy their own spheres of autonomy and sovereignty”³⁰.

²³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 19.

²⁴ Cf. *I Pe* 3, 15.

²⁵ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, p.3

²⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nn. 1906-1909.

²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1908.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.13.

²⁹ Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”, in *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16-21.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.45.

“In the free society, the state is one institution, one player, among other. It is an indispensable player in its service to all the other players, but it is subject to the subjectivity of the society, and the subjectivity of society consists in free persons and free persons in community living in obedience to God and solidarity with one another”³¹

We are not to forget that the Pope said solidarity “is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. This determination is based on the solid conviction that what is hindering full development is that desire for profit and that thirst for power already mentioned”³². *Solidarity* is a consequence of the respect for the *transcendent nature* of the human person, and in a democratic society it contributes to the full development “of the whole individual and of all people”³³, setting a right order of values “guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones”³⁴.

Contrary to solidarity is what John Paul II calls “pragmatism”: “a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards "having" rather than "being", and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself (Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today *Gaudium et Spes*, 35; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, 19: *loc. cit.*, 266f.)³⁵.

To prevail over this threat to the “integral development”: “it is (...) necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments. In this regard, it is not a matter of the duty of charity alone, that is, the duty to give from one's "abundance", and sometimes even out of one's needs, in order to provide what is essential for the life of a poor person. I am referring to the fact that even the decision to invest in one place rather than another, in one productive sector rather than another, is always *a moral and cultural choice*. Given the utter necessity of certain economic conditions and of political stability, the decision to invest, that is, to offer people an opportunity to make good use of their own labor, is also determined by an attitude of human sympathy and trust in Providence, which reveal the human quality of the person making such decisions”³⁶. And those decisions are acts of solidarity.

³¹ Richard John Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”, in *First Things* 73 (May 1997): 16-21.

³² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n.38.

³³ Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, n. 42.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.36.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.36.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n.36.

V. Educating Christian as Democrats: Christian University and Democracy.

The Christian University is responsible for transmitting the fullness of the Social Doctrine of the Church, and proving that teaching is a reasonable proposal for society. We have already quoted John Paul II's statements about the need of education and formation in true ideals for a person to act correctly in a democratic society. The "subjectivity" of society demands the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility³⁷.

"The Church must be committed to the task of educating and supporting lay people involved in law-making, government and the administration of justice, so that legislation will always reflect those principles and moral values which are in conformity with a sound anthropology and advance the common good"³⁸.

But the creation of a civic culture embraces all the levels of society. Teachers must teach inside as well as outside the classrooms, specially by means of their own example, that *participation*, "the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange, (...) is necessary to all". Everyone is called to participate "according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person"³⁹. "Participation is achieved first of all by taking charge of the areas for which one assumes *personal responsibility*: by the care taken for the education of his family, by conscientious work, and so forth, man participates in the good of others and of society"⁴⁰

Every citizen in a democratic society is responsible for the common good. It can be achieved only if everyone honors his duties, asks respect for his rights, and live in solidarity with other persons: "As far as possible citizens should take an active part in *public life* The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. "One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom."(Cf. *GS* 31 § 3)"⁴¹

"As with any ethical obligation, the participation of all in realizing the common good calls for a continually renewed *conversion* of the social partners. Fraud and other subterfuges, by which some people evade the constraints of the law and the prescriptions of societal obligation, must be firmly condemned because they are incompatible with the requirements of justice. Much care should be taken to promote institutions that improve the conditions of human life (Cf. *GS* 30 § 1)"⁴².

Teachers should also encourage those students with special aptitude for public service, to correspond to that call, remembering them that "it is incumbent on those who

³⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 45.

³⁸ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, n. 19.

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1913.

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1914.

⁴¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1915.

⁴² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1916.

exercise authority to strengthen the values that inspire the confidence of the members of the group and encourage them to put themselves at the service of others. Participation begins with education and culture. "One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and optimism."(GS 31 § 3)⁴³.

VI. Conclusion.

During the Jubilee of University Professors, John Paul II described Universities as "cultural laboratories", where students and professors, and through them human sciences and natural sciences, may engage in a constructive dialogue, considering always "the moral law as an intrinsic requirement of research and a condition for its full value in seeking out the truth"⁴⁴.

The Pope invited us to reconsider the educational function of the University, and adopt what he calls "Christian Humanism" –the Christian image of the human person- as the ruler principle of our profession as teachers. Nevertheless, the richness of Christian faith will produce the more fruit "to the extent that Christian witness is borne by energetic thought and coherency of life, in a critical and constructive dialogue with those who promote a different vision"⁴⁵.

The Pope inspires us in our task with those words: "With insistence I wish to encourage the people of Latin America (...) to hold on to hope amid the present difficulties, and not to lose sight of the fact that, given the great human and natural resources available, the present situation is not irreversible and can be overcome with everyone's help. If this is to happen, private or partisan interests must be set aside, and the interest of the nation must be promoted by every legitimate means, through a return to moral values, open and frank dialogue, and the renunciation of what is superfluous in order to help those who are in any way in need. In this spirit, it should be remembered that political activity is above all a noble, demanding and generous service to the community"⁴⁶.

Catholic Universities in Mexico may contribute to build democratic culture if they teach their students the Social Doctrine of the Church, proving them it is not a *wishful thinking*, but an every day life reality: dialogue, responsibility of participation, solidarity, respect for the human person. Surely not a minor contribution.

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1917.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Address to University Professors of all Nations*, September 9th 2000, n. 5.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Address to University Professors of all Nations*, September 9th 2000, n. 7.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, January 10th 2002, n.4.