



23 February 2000

**Address to the Plenary Session on the Subject
'Democracy – Reality and Responsibility'**

The Supreme Pontiff affirms that the Academy 'helps to ensure that social doctrines do not ignore the spiritual nature of human beings'. He adds that the Church values the democratic system as long as it is founded upon certain principles. Indeed, a democracy without values can turn into totalitarianism. In the context of globalisation, citizens should participate in their political community and the 'principle of subsidiarity' should be implemented. Equally, there must be ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation to make 'genuine democracy, value-based democracy, a reality for the men and women of the twenty-first century'.

1. I am pleased to greet you on the occasion of the sixth plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. I thank your President, Professor Edmond Malinvaud, and all of you, the Academy members, for your dedication and commitment to the work which you undertake for the good of the Church and of the human family.

As you are well aware, the Church's social doctrine is meant to be a vehicle through which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to bear on the different cultural, economic and political situations facing modern men and women. It is in this precise context that the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences makes a most important contribution: as experts in the various social disciplines and as followers of the Lord Jesus you enter into that *dialogue between Christian faith and scientific methodology* which seeks true and effective responses to the problems and difficulties which beset the human family. As my predecessor Pope Paul VI said, *all social action involves a doctrine*,¹ and the Academy helps to ensure that social doctrines do not ignore the spiritual nature of human beings, their deep longing for happiness and their supernatural destiny which transcends the merely biological and material aspects of life. The Church's task – her right and her duty – is to enunciate the basic ethical principles governing the foundation and proper functioning of society, within which men and women make their pilgrim way to their transcendent destiny.

2. The subject chosen for the Academy's sixth plenary session, *Democracy – Reality and Responsibility*, represents a most important topic for the new millennium. While it is true that the Church offers no concrete model of government or economic system,² she 'values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate'.³

At the dawning of the Third Millennium, a serious question confronts democracy. There is a tendency to see intellectual relativism as the necessary corollary of democratic forms of political life. In such a view, truth is determined by the majority and varies in accordance with passing cultural and political trends. From this point of view, those who are convinced that certain truths are absolute and immutable are considered unreasonable and unreliable. On the other hand, as Christians we firmly believe 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*'.⁴

Thus, it is important that Christians be helped to show that the defence of universal and unchanging moral norms is a service rendered not only to individuals but also to society as a whole: such norms 'represent the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of *genuine democracy*'.⁵ In fact, democracy itself is a means and not an end, and '*the value of a democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes*'.⁶ These values cannot be based on changeable opinion but only on the acknowledgment of an objective moral law, which ever remains the necessary point of reference.

3. At the same time the Church refuses to espouse that extremism or fundamentalism which, in the name of an ideology purporting to be scientific or religious, claims the right to impose on others its own concept of what is right and good. *Christian truth is not an ideology*. Rather it recognises that changing social and political realities cannot be confined within rigid structures. What the Church does is constantly to reaffirm the transcendent dignity of the human person, and constantly to defend human rights and freedom. The *freedom* which the Church promotes *attains its fullest development and expression only in openness to and acceptance of the*

truth. 'In a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation and man is exposed to the violence of passion and to manipulation, both open and hidden'.⁷

4. There is no doubt that the new millennium will see the continuation of the phenomenon of globalisation, that process by which the world moves ever closer to becoming a homogeneous whole. In this context it is important to remember that the 'health' of a political community can be gauged in no small way by the *free and responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs*. In fact, such participation is a 'necessary condition and sure guarantee of the development of the whole individual and of all people'.⁸ In other words, smaller social units – whether nations themselves, communities, ethnic or religious groups, families or individuals – must not be namelessly absorbed into a greater conglomeration, thus losing their identity and having their prerogatives usurped. Rather, the proper autonomy of each social class and organisation, each in its own sphere, must be defended and upheld. This is nothing other than the *principle of subsidiarity*, which requires that a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its rightful functions; instead the higher order should support the lower order and help it to coordinate its activity with that of the rest of society, always with a view to serving the common good.⁹ Public opinion needs to be educated in the importance of the principle of subsidiarity for the survival of a truly democratic society.

The global challenges that the human family faces in the new millennium also serve to highlight another dimension of the Church's social doctrine: its place in *ecumenical and interreligious cooperation*. The century just past has seen enormous progress in multilateral initiatives to defend human dignity and promote peace. The era upon which we are now embarking must see a continuation of such efforts: without the concerted and united action of all believers – indeed of all men and women of good will – little can be accomplished to make genuine democracy, value-based democracy, a reality for the men and women of the twenty-first century.

5. Distinguished and dear academicians, I express once more my appreciation of the valuable service which you render in bringing Christian enlightenment to those areas of modern social life where confusion about essentials often obscures and suffocates the lofty ideals planted in the human heart. With prayers for the success of your meeting I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I willingly extend to your families and your loved ones.

1 Cf. *Populorum Progressio*, n. 39.

2 Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, n. 43.

3 *Ibid.*, n. 46.

4 *Ibid.*, n. 46.

5 *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 96.

6 *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 70.

7 *Centesimus Annus*, n. 46.

8 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 44.

9 Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, n. 48.