



# THE HUMAN COMMUNITY

## 2. Participation in Social Life

### Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

#### I. AUTHORITY

##### *The need for authority in human society*

"Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all." (John XXIII)

By "authority" one means the quality by virtue of which persons or institutions make laws and give orders to men and expect obedience from them. (1897)

Every human community needs an authority to govern it. The foundation of such authority lies in human nature. It is necessary for the unity of the state. Its role is to ensure as far as possible the common good of the society. (1898)

##### *All authority is ultimately from God*

The authority required by the moral order derives from God: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement." (Rom 13:1-2; cf. 1 Pt 2:13-17) (1899)

##### *Respect and obedience to those in authority*

The duty of obedience requires all to give due honour to authority, and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good-will.

Pope St. Clement of Rome provides the Church's most ancient prayer for political authorities: "Grant to them, Lord, health, peace, concord and stability, so that they may exercise without offence the sovereignty that you have given them. Master, heavenly King of the ages, you give glory, honour and power over the things of earth to the sons of men. Direct, Lord, their counsel, following what is pleasing and acceptable in your sight, so that by exercising with devotion and in peace and gentleness the power that you have given to them, they may find favour with you." (1900)

##### *Political regimes must serve the good of the communities they serve*

If authority belongs to the order established by God, "the choice of the political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free decision of the citizens."

The diversity of political regimes is morally acceptable, provided they serve the legitimate good of the communities that adopt them. Regimes whose nature is contrary to the natural law, to the public order and to the fundamental rights of persons cannot achieve the common good of the nations on which they have been imposed. (1901)

##### *Authority is not self-sufficient*

Authority does not derive its moral legitimacy from itself. It must not behave in a despotic manner, but must act for the common good as a "moral force based on freedom and a sense of responsibility":

"A human law has the character of law to the extent that it accords with right reason, and thus derives from the eternal law. Insofar as it falls short of right reason it is said to be an unjust law, and thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence." (St. Thomas Aquinas). (1902)

##### *Unjust and immoral laws do not bind in conscience*

Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned and if it employs morally licit means to attain it. If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience. In such a case, "authority breaks down completely and results in shameful abuse." (John XXIII). (1903)

##### *The rule of law not arbitrary will of men*

"It is preferable that each power be balanced by other powers and by other spheres of responsibility which keep it within proper bounds. This is the principle of the 'rule of law,' in which the law is sovereign, and not the arbitrary will of men." (1904)

#### II. THE COMMON GOOD

##### *What is the common good?*

In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person:

"Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together." (Letter of Barnabas) (1905)

##### *Three essential elements of the common good*

By common good is to be understood "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily." The common good concerns the life of all. It calls for prudence from each, and even more from those who exercise the office of authority. It consists of *three essential elements*: (1906)

1. Respect for the person. First, the common good presupposes *respect for the person* as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfil his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard... privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion." (1907)

2. Social well-being. Second, the common good requires the *social well-being* and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on. (1908)

3. Peace. Finally, the common good requires *peace*, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the *security* of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defence. (1909)

### ***The political community***

Each human community possesses a common good which permits it to be recognized as such; it is in the *political community* that its most complete realization is found. It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens and intermediate bodies. (1910)

### ***A universal common good oriented towards the progress of persons***

Human interdependence is increasing and gradually spreading throughout the world. The unity of the human family, embracing people who enjoy equal natural dignity, implies a *universal common good*. This good calls for an organization of the community of nations able to "provide for the different needs of men; this will involve the sphere of social life to which belong questions of food, hygiene, education,... and certain situations arising here and there, as for example... alleviating the miseries of refugees dispersed throughout the world, and assisting migrants and their families." (1911)

The common good is always oriented towards the progress of persons: "The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around." This order is founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love. (1912)

## **III. RESPONSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION**

### ***What is participation?***

"Participation" is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. (1913)

### ***Personal responsibility and public life***

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. (1914)

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." (1915)

### ***The common good calls for continually renewed conversion***

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. (1916)

It is incumbent on those who 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." (1917)

## **IN BRIEF**

- **"There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." (Rom 13:1) (1918)**
- **Every human community needs an authority in order to endure and develop. (1919)**
- **"The political community and public authority are based on human nature and therefore... belong to an order established by God." (1920)**
- **Authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society. To attain this it must employ morally acceptable means. (1921)**
- **The diversity of political regimes is legitimate, provided they contribute to the good of the community. (1922)**
- **Political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and must guarantee the conditions for the exercise of freedom. (1923)**
- **The common good comprises "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily". (1924)**
- **The common good consists of three essential elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and of its members. (1925)**
- **The dignity of the human person requires the pursuit of the common good. Everyone should be concerned to create and support institutions that improve the conditions of human life. (1926)**
- **It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society. The common good of the whole human family calls for an organization of society on the international level. (1927)**