

END-OF-YEAR REFLECTION

Mending a World That Is Torne

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We take leave of the year 2016 with a long list of unresolved problems, to which new ruptures keep getting added. The pain keeps increasing, and the deaths of so many “saints Innocents” threaten to eclipse whatever hopes are engendered by the “birth” of the many initiatives of solidarity. Every human drama produces lesser or greater heroes, who are often hidden but who heal, embrace, and accompany the distressed. Wherever new suffering arises, there also arise concrete individuals who act in solidarity, who share what they have, and who dare to denounce the injustice that has caused the suffering. We have seen this in the drama of the refugees, in the peace process in Colombia, in the hurricane in Haiti... Mending the world also means doing away with the scandalous difference between the wealth of the richest 1% and that of the remaining 99%. This rupture in humanity is also projected onto nature, with which we must enter into that dialogue called “ecology.”

It is clear to us that many of the world’s problems are caused by the refusal of op-

posing parties to engage in dialogue and by an increasingly polarized discourse, which destroys the intermediate positions that are the essential bridges toward true solutions.

Those of us at Cristianisme i Justícia make a plea for dialogue and for a lowering of the tensions which threaten to shatter good relations in the diverse realms of our lives.

The electoral benefits of confrontation

A common element can be found in the political events of this year 2016: the electoral benefits to be gained by confrontation. We are not talking about confrontation of ideas, but rather about confrontation of persons, of groups, of nations. We have seen this confrontation in the debate over Brexit, in the referendum on the peace agreement in Colombia, and in Trump’s victory in the United States.

When it comes to winning elections, recourse is had to personal insults, outright lies, shameless behavior, and the adoption

of extreme and irreconcilable positions because these appeal to social indignation and they channel people's anxiety about security and protection. The American elections are paradigmatic in that the candidate made no attempt to hide his prejudices, spewing forth senseless insults and displaying great impudence at every moment. A new current of narrow-minded authoritarianism has crept in through the cracks left open by a low-intensity democracy.

We are experiencing a political paradox: the same citizen who asks for transparency and greater democratic participation punishes the party that publicly reveals its internal debates because they are seen as evidence of weakness.

In the case of Spain, after four years of a government with an absolute majority, which was able to legislate without opposition, the lack of dialogue has condemned the country to a year of political paralysis. The minority positions have not been heard and allowed to enrich political debate; to the contrary, they have been crushed or ignored, thus making it impossible to build a truly democratic, pluralist society. The main objective has been to destroy the rival party or group, rather than to work for the interests of the country. And all this happens without even offering a proposal for rebuilding the ruins left by the social and political strife. In like manner we can consider the deterioration of Catalonia's relations with the other autonomous communities and with the central government. We cannot even to speak of a "dialogue of the deaf" since the dialogue ceased years ago, with the resulting risk of fractured parties, polarized opinions, and the disappearance of intermediate proposals.

There is no listening, just imposition. There is no appreciation and hardly any tolerance. There is no construction, just de-

struction. The complexity of the decisions to be made requires deliberation processes that are clear, transparent, and open to dialogue. Otherwise the average citizen, weary and disheartened, will either abstain or opt for whatever allows for swift change of political coordinates, even when that means authoritarianism, intolerance, and confrontation.

The extreme right as problem and as symptom

Another symptom revealing the degree of our society's hostility toward democracy is the growth of the extreme right in Europe: it is no longer just the ideology of tiny minorities but has become a real temptation for large numbers of people. In Poland a party like Law and Justice won 37.6% of the votes in 2015; in Hungary the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) won 20.2% of the votes in 2014. These movements are growing not only in countries which have recently become democratic. The Nordic countries have also seen an alarming increase in extreme-right popularity, which has reached 13% in Sweden and 21% in Denmark. Countries with a long democratic tradition also give cause for serious concern: in France the extreme right is backed by 27% of voters, in Germany by 14%, in Switzerland by 29%, and in Austria by 20%. Sadly, the ascendancy of the extreme right is influencing the politics of all European countries in matters such as immigration, acceptance of refugees, and even religious liberty.

Much of the growth of the extreme-right occurs precisely in cities or neighborhoods that have been considered territory of the leftist parties. The growing inequality and the globalization of the unskilled labor market have left certain social strata unprotected

and have inspired fear in an important part of the population. Immigration has come to be seen as economically, culturally, and religiously threatening (and that in a de-Christianized Europe!). Fear blazes up easily, and it spreads in the form of the extreme right.

To halt the growth of the movements of the extreme right, we must not ignore the profound causes that give rise to them. Rather, we must create a new narrative in which a key part is played by reduction of inequality, social protections, and the struggle against social prejudice. What is at stake for both political parties and civil society is not just social harmony but the future of our democracy. Political democracy cannot exist without economic democracy.

If a few years ago we could have thought that democracy and modernity were the “end of history” and that all countries would slowly but surely be convinced of that “truth,” we are presently witnessing a serious reversal (in Erdogan’s Turkey, in Putin’s Russia, in Trump’s America). If a few years ago we seemed to be advancing inexorably toward a globalization of democracy, today what seems more probable is a return to a globalization of fear and the erection of borders.

New wars begun, without an end to old ones

That contagious fear and those walls that stop people but don’t intercept capital are our tragic response to the drama of the refugees. Since World War Two never have there been so many millions of refugees and displaced persons in the world. This increase is due to the birth of new armed conflicts and the renewal of older ones which, like poorly healed wounds, begin to bleed again.

The *Alerta 2016!* report of the Escola de Cultura de Pau registered a total of 35

armed conflicts in 2015: 13 in Africa, 12 in Asia, 6 in the Near East, 3 in Europe, and one in the Americas. To be sure, the news media are now focusing their attention on Syria and Iraq, but there are many other countries that are experiencing high levels of military conflict: Ukraine, Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, Palestine, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, ...

These armed conflicts subject the civilian population to massacres, summary executions, arbitrary arrests, torture, forced displacement, recruitment of child soldiers, and sexual violence as a weapon of war, to mention only some of the consequences. The data present a frightening picture: there are 83 regions in the world where tensions are high, and over 60 million people are refugees or displaced persons. In 2015 some 167,000 persons died as the result of armed conflicts, and it does not seem that the figures for 2016 will be any better.

Reversing this worldwide tendency to violence as the way to resolve conflicts (and as a profitable business, let’s not forget!) requires us to work hard for a cultural shift toward peace and toward values and attitudes that make life the first priority. María Zambrano said it well: “Peace is much more than taking a stance: it is an authentic revolution, a way of living, a way of inhabiting the planet, a way of being a person.”

Ecclesial dissidence

The lack of a true culture of peace and dialogue is evident also in certain ecclesial spheres. When Pope Francis decided to open a calm, frank debate about some polemical topics, the extreme right in the church reacted vehemently. Paradoxically, those who have raised their voices against the pontiff are precisely those who defend the need for strong papal authority in the

church and who see the transfer of certain discussions to national bishops' conferences as a source of chaos, division, and relativism. And again paradoxically, those who formerly denounced church progressives as heterodox because they disagreed with certain directives of John Paul II are now claiming that Pope Francis is heterodox. It would seem, then, that those who portrayed themselves as papists but who now criticize the Pope were not following the bishop of Rome but their own ideology.

We have a Pope who encourages debate and wants others to express their disagreement with him, because he is convinced that God guides the church by inspiring not only its head but all its members. That was how he proceeded at the beginning of the Synod on the Family: he urged each bishop to express his opinion only after consulting with the faithful in his diocese. Now, three years after the Pope's election, the conservative sectors of the church are publicly manifesting their inconformity, and they do so on the grounds that open dialogue about certain topics provokes uncertainty, confusion, and alarm in many of the faithful. The difficulties arise from fear of pluralism and a longing for ecclesial authoritarianism of an absolute sort.

The mass media as a Roman circus

The world needs more dialogue, but the mass media, so important in our day and age, do nothing more than fan the flame of the conflicts. Albert Camus often repeated this motto: "Readers should be given what they need to know, not what they like to read." He claimed that "a country is as good as its press," to which today we would have to add television and radio. It

is clear, however, that some televised debates are nothing more than reenactments of the battles waged in the Roman circuses: what the people want is confrontation and blood. The networks pay the new gladiators according to the number of darts and punches they deliver in the form of shouts and insults. Even the news programs report on catastrophes with ever increasing crudeness in order to overcome the growing insensitivity of viewers. Similarly, headlines are filled with expressions that underline the crises in the institutions, the confrontations in the parties, the disagreements between coaches and players, etc. Criticisms uttered in private are elevated to veritable declarations of war. The media eagerly narrate the ruptures that they themselves have helped to create. The audience rules, and so does advertising, but that means that truth must be replaced by spectacle. According to Pope Francis, the four great temptations of the media are untruth, calumny, defamation, and sensationalism.

Those of us at Cristianisme i Justícia want to make a plea for dialogue and debate. Since the debates in the agoras of ancient Greece, these principles have been the foundation of our culture and of what we are today. Rome fell when it got transformed into a decadent spectacle. Europe was reborn into modernity by recovering the spirit of Greece. The end of calm exposition of ideas will be the end of democracy and, once again, the end of Europe. Impelled by greed, fear, base passions, and indifference to the pain of others, we are moving quickly toward the precipice. Nevertheless, despite all evidence, our faith in humanity and in what is most sacred therein encourage us to believe that we can help to turn the tide.

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