

END-OF-YEAR REFLECTION

**Dark Clouds Loom ... But
The Sun Is Still There!**

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As we conclude 2018, menacing clouds hang over our democracies. The globalization of authoritarianism appears to be suffocating our hopes for progressively more humane societies. Are we able to believe that, despite the dark shadows, the sun is still there?

There was a time when we were optimists

A half-century ago, we felt energized by the construction of a new Europe, we were euphoric with the signs of economic progress (Western, of course!), and we believed that basic human rights (approved 70 years ago now) and democracy would steadily spread to all countries and cultures. The fall of the Berlin wall gave further impetus to our optimism. In that context, it was not surprising that F. Fukuyama should prophesy in 1992 that capitalism was the ultimate economic system. And even if leftists criticized him for shutting the door to all economic alternatives, many of them also felt certain that human rights and democracy were truly the “end of history.” To

be sure, much time would still be needed for them to be universally recognized, but there was a blind faith that truth and reason had in themselves sufficient strength to prevail over all opposition. Some persons, acting out of other motives, wanted to make us believe that the final humanization of the planet could be brought about forcibly, by deposing tyrants like Saddam Hussein. They thought that authoritarian regimes throughout the world would fall one after the other, and all governments would finally embrace Western “truth.”

The resurgence of authoritarianism

Over the last decade a series of events has undermined our confidence in the possibility of a better political future: the economic crisis in the United States and Europe after the collapse of Lehman Brothers (2008), the start of the war in Syria (2011), the proclamation of the Islamic State group (2014), the progressive increase in migratory pressure toward countries of the north, and the shifting of the balance of world power toward China. We realize that every country,

in times of crisis, will try to save itself by crawling into its little burrow and closing itself off to the outside world. We have seen it happen in Russia, as Putin bolsters his country's pride in being again a major power; we have seen it happen in Turkey, where Erdogan has restored the sultanate; we have seen it happen in other countries as well: in the United States with the triumph of Trump, in Brazil with the election of Bolsonaro, in Great Britain with the chaos of Brexit, in Italy, in Poland, in Hungary, and in many other countries. Even Spain, ever fearful of resuscitating the shameful specter of Franco, is feeling the temptation to reassert national pride as it raises the flag against Catalan independence and against immigration (especially of Muslims). Murky clouds are certainly hovering over our democracies, and democracy itself is not being globalized as we had hoped; rather, it is authoritarianism that is rapidly gaining ground.

Storm clouds over the Church of Francis

This whole panorama also affects the Church, whether because public opinion is shifting toward those authoritarian movements or because some Christians in the movements think they are helping the faith by actively contributing to them. Those of us at *Cristianisme i Justícia* denounce every attempt to use Christianity as an argument for imposing totalitarian models. Often Christian signs (crosses, feast days, worship, etc.) are used as identifying badges, thus depriving them of their most profound significance, which is the resolute refusal to absolutize the (political, economic, or mediatic) powers of this world.

The election of Francis as bishop of Rome has meant an ecclesial springtime. A pope called from the ends of the earth

wanted to do away with the Vatican intrigues that had brought about the valiant resignation of Benedict XVI. The so-called “theology of the people,” which drew on the best of “liberation theology,” meant both a truly Franciscan turn to the simplicity of the Gospel and a Jesuit return to Jesus’ woes against the rich and the powerful. The canonization last year of Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyr of El Salvador, has consecrated this path.

Nevertheless, some ecclesial groups hear the pope’s prophetic denunciations with a skeptical mind and are hoping for a quick end to his pontificate; other groups, of course, reject them in an attitude of open defiance. A certain pluralism has always existed in the Church, and it is a good thing. But not since the time of Lefebvre, who accused Paul VI and Vatican II of heresy, have we seen bishops express their opposition to the pope in such a brazen manner.

One of the first instances of open opposition was the letter sent by four cardinals to Pope Francis in September 2016, asking him to clarify some statements in his exhortation “*Amoris Laetitia*.” The cardinals claimed that some liberal interpretations of the document had caused “uncertainty, confusion, and alarm among many of the faithful.” The real alarm was actually created by this letter of protest, which made public the cardinals’ disaccord after the Synod had approved all the documents. What was novel in this letter was not in its expression of dissent but in the fact of its publication as a means of pressuring the pope in the face of what they thought was an unacceptable drift in the Church’s teaching. While some on the extreme right claim to have high esteem for the mercy of the Gospel, they practice mercy in only a generic and abstract way. That is why they react vehemently when attempts are made

to concretize mercy toward those whom the Gospel calls blessed: the poor of the earth and all those marginalized by the political, economic, and religious elites.

Ecclesial neo-fundamentalism seeks to take the edge off the sharp appeals and denunciations of the Gospel, leaving those to whom they are addressed in the past (or in the great beyond).

Meritocratic justice without mercy

The battle in the Church is not between rigourists and laxists but between two religious paradigms: one focuses on legalism, and the other focuses on mercy, which includes justice and exceeds it. The first paradigm, to be sure, tells how the mercy of God is found in the sacrament of confession, but it places such great emphasis on the individual “self” achieving “moral perfection” that it ends up despising all those who do not fit the bill for belonging to the church community. It is a religious paradigm that seeks an elitist Church of the “pure,” of those who exult in their ability to accumulate merit. Paradoxically, in the case of clergy abuse, it runs the risk of hiding the shameful deeds in order to protect that image of a Church of “the perfect.”

We are witnessing a conflict between those who hold onto a rational (but extremely masculine) image of God as Lord and Judge and those who seek for the God of the Gospel, the God who is Love. Love is always demanding, sometimes more so than brute law, but love embraces us much as a mother embraces her child. Naturally, only these latter are favorable toward welcoming LGBTI persons and enhancing the role of women in the Church. They promote a Church that develops the “culture of caring,” especially toward society’s rejects, those who seem to count for nothing; they want a Church that involves such people in

a patient process of personal growth. They also long for a Church that is concerned about the welfare of Creation and so summons the world to practice a “green economy,” since the present level of consumption in the rich countries is in no way universalizable in ecological terms.

In contrast, the Church of the pure—those who believe themselves capable of earning merit before God—confesses a capitalistic creed of meritocracy, which completely forgets, first, that all we have is gift and grace and, second, that individuals in our society are born and grow up in profoundly unequal situations.

It is perhaps for that reason that the strongest criticisms of Pope Francis have come from the United States. In that homeland of economic meritocracy (“if you want it, you can get it!”), the ecclesial right-wing and the economic right-wing seem to have formed an alliance with the aim of bringing Francis down. The ecclesial right wants to close off every opening toward certain groups, while the economic right wants to drown out the pope’s prophetic stance in matters of ecology, militarism, social justice, and immigration. Indeed, the pope is one of the world’s strongest opponents of the four demons espoused by Trump and the extreme right in the U.S.: denial of climate change, support for the arms lobby (internally, the right to bear arms; externally, the arms race), promotion of inequality to make people work, and cessation of immigration.

Pseudo-Christian symbolism

In Spain, as well as in the rest of Europe, we are witnessing a resurgence of varieties of nationalism that are racist, exclusionary, and authoritarian. Like tortoises, nations are crawling back into their shells out of fear of globalization and unwillingness

to face the challenges of the epoch in which we live. But their objective is not to remain quiet and inactive like the tortoise; rather, they are seeking the means to confront their problems in ways that will allow them to recover the great glories the country once had. So the winds now pushing those dark clouds toward our continent are fear, nostalgia, and lust for power.

The examples are manifold: Great Britain with its Brexit; Poland with its ever less independent judiciary; the new government in Italy; the growing ranks of the extreme-right in Austria, Holland, and France; the pro-Franco enthusiasts in Spain, coming out of their tomb; the regression taking place in Eastern Europe; and the growing resistance to accept refugees. In Germany, the state of Bavaria had decided to restore crosses in all public buildings, but we should never forget: that is not the cross of Jesus!

Tragically, the new authoritarianism is increasingly irresponsible in its use of language and symbol. Politicians insult and denigrate one another from their Twitter accounts or in their public statements. It is as though they had been trained in the heat of the debates on certain popular TV channels (they are actually shouting matches!). The “spectacle politics” in Catalonia and in Spain generally is doing away with the “politically correct.”

Nevertheless, the sun is still there

There are still signs of hope. This year has been very hard for the Church because of the publicity about clergy abuse. The revelations of unacceptable tolerance for it, the malevolent protection of the guilty, or the simple inability to establish adequate protocols have done much damage, but the scandal may be reaching its end. Unable to endure such criticism any longer, the

Church will end up doing what it must. The international meeting called by the pope for February is good news; all religious congregations are accordingly drawing up very strict protocols.

At the same time, we do not know whether the pope will broach the difficult question of the shortage of priests. In certain places, like Amazonia in Brazil, it is no longer taboo to discuss the question of married priests. In any case, there are already a great many communities that are entrusted to women who preach the Gospel and give out communion, and there is reason to hope that their role will be progressively normalized.

There are also not a few Christian churches that view the rise of the extreme right with abhorrence, and they clearly denounce the incompatibility of such movements with the Gospel. In the United States, for example, there is the “Vote Common Good” initiative organized by the Evangelicals against Trump. Another encouraging example is the marvelous gesture of a church in Holland that kept a religious service going for 700 hours to avoid the deportation of an immigrant. In Spain many religious communities and Christian families have houses of hospitality for recently arrived refugees.

At the international level, the Church has just canonized the monks, priests, and nuns who were killed by terrorists in Algeria for sharing in the life and suffering of Muslims. The Vatican has reached an agreement with the Chinese government, allowing the Church greater freedom. The Christians of South Korea are optimistic about the progress made toward unification with North Korea

Because the sun is still there, although at times we don't see it.

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