Drago Karl Ocvirk

Catholic Church and Nationalism

Some Doctrinal, Historical and Practical Aspects[1]

At the outset I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to take part at this distinguish Conference, which happens, as it was already emphasized by some speakers, for the first time in one former communist country. It is a happy event for Slovenia because it also witnesses that our great country has become a member of European Union and Nato and is accepted as such by CCADD too.

You rightly presume that in this part of Europe we all have a genuine historical experience of nation and questions concerning it. Even though, it is still other thing to reflect and articulate such an experience. My task here is not to reflect on this experience but to present some doctrinal, historical and practical aspects of the Catholic Church's relationship with a question of nation, e. g. nationalism. As we all know the concept of nationalism is extremely complex in the meaning it goes from very positive to the very negative, from patriotism to chauvinism on opposite site. Let me remind us that there are at least three main meanings of this concept:

1. Cultural Nationalism: The Nation as Positive Focus of Identity
2. Liberal Nationalism: The Nation as a Basis for Liberal Democracy
3. Triumphal Nationalism: The Nation as a Claim to Superiority

1. Cultural Natioalism: The Nation as Positive Focus of Identity

Once aware of these, at least, three meanings we can understand why well-known Canadian theologian Gregory Baum, who wrote in his study *Nationalism, Religion, and Ethics*,[2] pretends that an ethics for nationalism

---

[2] See G. Baum, *Nationalism, Religion, and Ethics*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2001.

is absent in the Catholic tradition. »There exists little systematic theological or ethical reflection on the polymorphous phenomenon of nationalism. What impressed me as a Catholic theologian was that Catholic Social Teaching, which constitutes an impressive body of literature and provides a rich source of social and economic ethics, offers no systematic treatment of nationalism.« Indeed, what one can find in the Catholic social teaching is not especially about nationalism and, as Baum rightly underlines, »even the recent, otherwise excellent New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought, published in the United States, carries no article on nationalism.«

Regarding cultural nationalism, the Catholic teaching is focused today on so called inculturation in a frame of evangelization. It is true, Catholic Church does not automatically embrace a national culture as non-problematic in relation to the Gospel. In accordance with the Gospel the Catholic Church wants both to improve a given culture and give a new cultural colored expression to the Gospel.

Theologically speaking this process of an evangelization of a new culture may be expressed in relation to the fundamental mysteries of faith, which are: Creation, Incarnation, Redemption through the Pascal Mystery, and Pentecost. So, the culture in generally is seen as »the human response to God's continuing creative gift«[3] The importance of each specific culture is especially valuated by the incarnation as stressed by the pope John Paul II. in his *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*: »Just as 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (*Jn* 1:14), so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, *must take root* in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word. Inculturation is precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into cultures. For the Incarnation of the Son of God, precisely because it was complete and concrete, was also an incarnation in a particular culture.«[4]

This optimistic view on culture as a basic anthropological and ethnical reality must be, nonetheless, corrected because there are also destructive forces inside the culture. A theological critical key is the mystery of the Redemption as it happened during the paschal events. Therefore, there is a »healthy tension in any process of inculturation: an embracing of human realities and a purification of dehumanizing aspects of the culture from within. In the words of Ecclesia in Africa, inculturation, which involves both 'insertion' and 'transformation' (no. 59), must 'follow the 'logic' proper to the Mystery of the redemption': every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the Paschal Mystery. It is by looking at the

---

[3] M. P. Gallagher, S.J., *Clashing Symbols. An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, Paulist Press, New York, 1998, 106.

[4] N. 93 and 94. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html, 2. 9. 2004.

Mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption that the values and counter-values of cultures are to be discerned' (no. 61). This more prophetic note in the chord of inculturation seeks to do justice to the presence of evil in human history, and to the long struggle of each culture towards Christian authenticity.«[5] The fourth pace of the evangelization or Catholic relation to the culture is the Pentecost. It, indeed, »symbolizes the beginning of a new unification under the Spirit, and instead of the division of Babel, there becomes possible a different relationship between previously fragmented cultures. (...) In line with this Pentecost analogy one can also reflect on the challenge of today's pluralism of culture.«[6]

It seems that the cultural pluralism is today among the greatest challenge for humanity. The Catholic Church opposes in her official teaching a well-known thesis of the »clash of the civilizations« developed by Huntington and many others. Let me mention just two highly symbolic pope's interventions on this subject: one is his *Message for the celebration of the world day of peace* 1 January 2001, *Dialogue between cultures for a civilization of love and peace*,[7] the second one is his *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization in New York, October 5, 1995.*[8]

Ex. 1: Dialogue between cultures for a civilization of love and peace

1. At the dawn of a new millennium, there is growing hope that relationships between people will be increasingly inspired by the ideal of a truly universal brotherhood. Unless this ideal is shared, there will be no way to ensure a stable peace. There are many signs which suggest that this conviction is becoming more deeply rooted in people's minds. The importance of fraternity is proclaimed in the great »charters« of human rights; it is embodied in great international institutions, particularly the United Nations; and it is called for, as never before, by the process of globalization which is leading to a progressive unification of the economy, culture and society.

Human development and being part of a culture

6. The need to accept one's own culture as a structuring element of one's personality, especially in the initial stages of life, is a fact of universal experience whose importance can hardly be overestimated. Without a firm rooting in a specific »soil«, individuals risk being subjected at a still vulnerable age to an excess of conflicting stimuli which could impair their serene and balanced development. It is on the basis of this essential relationship

---

[5] M. P. Gallagher, S.J., *idem*, 107.
[6] M. P. Gallagher, S.J., *idem*, 108.
[7] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20001208_xxxiv-world-day-for-peace-en.html
[8] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno_en.html

with one's own »origins« – on the level of the family, but also of territory, society and culture – that people acquire a sense of their nationality, and culture tends to take on, to a greater or lesser degree in different places, a »national« configuration. The Son of God himself, by becoming man, acquired, along with a human family, a country. He remains for ever Jesus of Nazareth, the Nazarean (cf. Mk 10:47; Lk 18:37; Jn 1:45; 19:19). This is a natural process, in which sociological and psychological forces interact, with results that are normally positive and constructive. Love for one's country is thus a value to be fostered, without narrow-mindedness but with love for the whole human family(3) and with an effort to avoid those pathological manifestations which occur when the sense of belonging turns into self exaltation, the rejection of diversity, and forms of nationalism, racism and xenophobia.

7. Consequently, while it is certainly important to be able to appreciate the values of one's own culture, there is also a need to recognize that every culture, as a typically human and historically conditioned reality, necessarily has its limitations. In order to prevent the sense of belonging to one particular culture from turning into isolation, an effective antidote is a serene and unprejudiced knowledge of other cultures. Moreover, when cultures are carefully and rigorously studied, they very often reveal beneath their outward variations significant common elements. This can also be seen in the historical sequence of cultures and civilizations. The Church, looking to Christ, who reveals man to himself,(4) and drawing upon her experience of two thousand years of history, is convinced that »beneath all that changes, there is much that is unchanging«.(5) This continuity is based upon the essential and universal character of God's plan for humanity.

Cultural diversity should therefore be understood within the broader horizon of the unity of the human race. In a real way, this unity constitutes the primordial historical and ontological datum in the light of which the profound meaning of cultural diversity can be grasped. In fact, only an overall vision of both the elements of unity and the elements of diversity makes it possible to understand and interpret the full truth of every human culture.(6)

9. The radicalization of identity which makes cultures resistant to any beneficial influence from outside is worrying enough; but no less perilous is the slavish conformity of cultures, or at least of key aspects of them, to cultural models deriving from the Western world. Detached from their Christians origins, these models are often inspired by an approach to life marked by secularism and practical atheism and by patterns of radical individualism.

Dialogue between cultures

10. Individuals come to maturity through receptive openness to others and through generous self-giving to them; so too do cultures. Created by

people and at the service of people, they have to be perfected through dialogue and communion, on the basis of the original and fundamental unity of the human family as it came from the hands of God who »made from one stock every nation of mankind« (Acts 17:26).

The cultural practices which immigrants bring with them should be respected and accepted, as long as they do not contravene either the universal ethical values inherent in the natural law or fundamental human rights.

Respect for cultures and the »cultural profile« of different regions

14. It is a much more difficult thing to determine the extent to which immigrants are entitled to public legal recognition of the particular customs of their culture, which may not be readily compatible with the customs of the majority of citizens. The solution to this question, within a climate of genuine openness, calls for a realistic evaluation of the common good at any given time in history and in any given place and social context. Much depends upon whether people embrace a spirit of openness that, without yielding to indifferentism about values, can combine the concern for identity with the willingness to engage in dialogue.

Ex. 2: Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization

The Rights of Nations

5. The quest for freedom in the second half of the twentieth century has engaged not only individuals but nations as well. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War, it is important to remember that that war was fought because of violations of the rights of nations. Many of those nations suffered grievously for no other reason than that they were deemed »other«. Terrible crimes were committed in the name of lethal doctrines which taught the »inferiority« of some nations and cultures. In a certain sense, the United Nations Organization was born from a conviction that such doctrines were antithetical to peace; and the Charter's commitment to »save future generations from the scourge of war« (Preamble) surely implied a moral commitment to defend every nation and culture from unjust and violent aggression.

Unfortunately, even after the end of the Second World War, the rights of nations continued to be violated. To take but one set of examples, the Baltic States and extensive territories in Ukraine and Belarus were absorbed into the Soviet Union, as had already happened to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in the Caucasus. At the same time the so-called »People's Democracies« of Central and Eastern Europe effectively lost their sovereignty and were required to submit to the will dominating the entire bloc. The result of this artificial division of Europe was the »cold war«, a situa-

tion of international tension in which the threat of a nuclear holocaust hung over humanity. It was only when freedom was restored to the nations of Central and Eastern Europe that the promise of the peace which should have come with the end of the war began to be realized for many of the victims of that conflict.

6. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, spoke eloquently of the rights of persons; but no similar international agreement has yet adequately addressed the rights of nations. This situation must be carefully pondered, for it raises urgent questions about justice and freedom in the world today.

In reality the problem of the full recognition of the rights of peoples and nations has presented itself repeatedly to the conscience of humanity, and has also given rise to considerable ethical and juridical reflection. I am reminded of the debate which took place at the Council of Constance in the fifteenth century, when the representatives of the Academy of Krakow, headed by Pawel Wlodkowic, courageously defended the right of certain European peoples to existence and independence. Still better known is the discussion which went on in that same period at the University of Salamanca with regard to the peoples of the New World. And in our own century, how can I fail to mention the prophetic words of my predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, who in the midst of the First World War reminded everyone that »nations do not die«, and invited them »to ponder with serene conscience the rights and the just aspirations of peoples« (*To the Peoples at War and their Leaders*, 28 July 1915)?

7. Today the problem of nationalities forms part of a new world horizon marked by a great »mobility« which has blurred the ethnic and cultural frontiers of the different peoples, as a result of a variety of processes such as migrations, mass-media and the globalization of the economy. And yet, precisely against this horizon of universality we see the powerful re-emergence of a certain ethnic and cultural consciousness, as it were an explosive need for identity and survival, a sort of counterweight to the tendency toward uniformity. This is a phenomenon which must not be underestimated or regarded as a simple left-over of the past. It demands serious interpretation, and a closer examination on the levels of anthropology, ethics and law.

This tension between the particular and the universal can be considered immanent in human beings. By virtue of sharing in the same human nature, people automatically feel that they are members of one great family, as is in fact the case. But as a result of the concrete historical conditioning of this same nature, they are necessarily bound in a more intense way to particular human groups, beginning with the family and going on to the various groups to which they belong and up to the whole of their ethnic and cultural group, which is called, not by accident, a »nation«, from the Latin word »nasci«: »to be born«. This term, enriched with another one, »patria« (fa-

therland/motherland), evokes the reality of the family. The human condition thus finds itself between these two poles — universality and particularity — with a vital tension between them; an inevitable tension, but singularly fruitful if they are lived in a calm and balanced way.

8. Upon this anthropological foundation there also rest the »rights of nations«, which are nothing but »human rights« fostered at the specific level of community life. A study of these rights is certainly not easy, if we consider the difficulty of defining the very concept of »nation«, which cannot be identified a priori and necessarily with the State. Such a study must nonetheless be made, if we wish to avoid the errors of the past and ensure a just world order.

A presupposition of a nation's rights is certainly its right to exist: therefore no one — neither a State nor another nation, nor an international organization — is ever justified in asserting that an individual nation is not worthy of existence. This fundamental right to existence does not necessarily call for sovereignty as a state, since various forms of juridical aggregation between different nations are possible, as for example occurs in Federal States, in Confederations or in States characterized by broad regional autonomies. (...)

But while the »rights of the nation« express the vital requirements of »particularity«, it is no less important to emphasize the requirements of universality, expressed through a clear awareness of the duties which nations have vis-à-vis other nations and humanity as a whole. Foremost among these duties is certainly that of living in a spirit of peace, respect and solidarity with other nations. Thus the exercise of the rights of nations, balanced by the acknowledgement and the practice of duties, promotes a fruitful »exchange of gifts«, which strengthens the unity of all mankind.

Respect of differences

9. (...) From bitter experience, then, we know that the fear of »difference«, especially when it expresses itself in a narrow and exclusive nationalism which denies any rights to »the other«, can lead to a true nightmare of violence and terror. And yet if we make the effort to look at matters objectively, we can see that, transcending all the differences which distinguish individuals and peoples, there is a fundamental commonality. For different cultures are but different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. And it is precisely here that we find one source of the respect which is due to every culture and every nation: every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life. The heart of every culture is its approach to the greatest of all mysteries: the mystery of God.

10. Our respect for the culture of others is therefore rooted in our respect for each community's attempt to answer the question of human life.

And here we can see how important it is to safeguard the fundamental right to freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, as the cornerstones of the structure of human rights and the foundation of every truly free society. No one is permitted to suppress those rights by using coercive power to impose an answer to the mystery of man. (...)

11. In this context, we need to clarify the essential difference between an unhealthy form of nationalism, which teaches contempt for other nations or cultures, and patriotism, which is a proper love of one's country. True patriotism never seeks to advance the well-being of one's own nation at the expense of others. For in the end this would harm one's own nation as well: doing wrong damages both aggressor and victim. Nationalism, particularly in its most radical forms, is thus the antithesis of true patriotism, and today we must ensure that extreme nationalism does not continue to give rise to new forms of the aberrations of totalitarianism. This is a commitment which also holds true, obviously, in cases where religion itself is made the basis of nationalism, as unfortunately happens in certain manifestations of so-called »fundamentalism«.«

The Catholic doctrinal views on Cultural nationalism already contains, as we saw, an acerb critics of any kind of triumphal nationalism or chauvinism pretending to a cultural and national superiority over the other national cultures or nations. But following *The paths of nations in the West* we discover - with help of Krzysztof Pomian[9] - that Churches have had a very important role in the process of formation of European nations including Russia. »The trajectories that unite the starting point with the final point, ethnics groups with nations, result from the game of six forces. These forces co-produce sometimes conflict in different variables.«[10] These forces are:

1. the dynasties,
2. the states,
3. the territorial entities (town, provinces ...),
4. the elites and cultural institutions (literature, arts, sciences ...),
5. the religious institutions and authorities (Catholic Church with her centre and her local branches, Orthodox Churches, Protestant Churches, rabbis),
6. the nations themselves: they are not only passive objects of their history but equally its coauthors.

»These six forces orient the fates of the all European nations. Nonetheless, their role varies from case to case.«[11] As a part of a cultural and national identity Churches have been involved in construction, defense, and

---

[9] See K. Pomian, *L'Europe et ses nations*, Gallimard, Paris, 1990.
[10] K. Pomian, *idem*, 158.
[11] K. Pomian, *idem*, 158.

promotion of many national cultures and states and have been, therefore, also involved in the conflicts and peacemaking among European nations. Till today, Churches can generate conflicts, take, for example, extremely difficult relationship between Russian Orthodox Church and Catholic Church especially in Belarus and Ukraine,[12] or implicit role of three religions Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam in the recent ethnic war in Croatia and Bosnia ...

2. Liberal Nationalism: The Nation as a Basis for Liberal Democracy

To become a nation it is not enough to have, let us say, a negative individuality that means to be identified only by a differentiation from other national entities by being oneself in front of all others. For example, it was necessary for an apparition of Slovenians as a nation to define itself first against Austro-Hungarian monarchy and, then, secondly, against communist Yugoslavia. K. Pomian calls this process *a horizontal integration*. But to exist and last out as a nation, there should be much more. Indeed, a nation is compound by economic, diplomatic, and passionate self-sufficiency. We all know what it means economic self-sufficiency, in ordinary language a diplomatic self-sufficiency means national independence and sovereignty. A passionate self-sufficiency is more than »national feeling«. This »passionate national identification« is a conglomerate of all other identifications, which are completely subdue to that national identification. In a pre-national traditional system there was identification on the one side with local, parochial and regional allegiances, and on the other side with the person of the king.[13] But today for Slovenia - if we stick to this example - to become and remain as such, its members have to identify themselves with it. And this identification is only possible, if there is not only a horizontal integration, but also *a vertical* one, as Pomian calls it.

What does mean a vertical integration?

Theoretically it means that people govern themselves as an individual in a way that a nation becomes an individual political body. »Consequently, a modern nation is partly an expression of a modern democratic project. Thanks to the form-nation the 'self-government', which could not concern in the form-city more than some small number of citizens, includes and embraces now millions, tens of millions of citizens. Being aware of this may help to understand and, in some way, legitimate the extreme pride of the great European nations in the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century.

---

[12] See W. Kalinowski, A. Moniak-Azzopardi, *Réemploi du religieux dans la géopolitique. Le cas des identités collectives russe et européenne*, in: *Etudes*, n. 398/2 (Fevrier 2003), 163-173.

[13] See, P. Manent, *Cours familier de philosophie politique*, Fayard, Paris, 2001, 85-99.

In Great Britain, Germany, and France the sentiments were spread that they had reached the one of the summits of the history, maybe even the summit of history, that the European vanguard had developed the ultimate political form of civilized life. It is not enough to say that the democracy and nation are two ways to express the project of *self-government*. The social dynamics introduced by national fact and the social dynamics introduced by democratic fact overlap and reinforce each other: the democracy and the nation are the factors of internal homogenization. The social and religious differences, difference between town and village, all these differences tend to melt into the French-nation or, and this is in some way the same thing, into a democratic republic. The 'peasants' become the 'French' at the same time as they become the 'citizens'.«[14]

To end this theoretical explanation of a vertical integration I like to remind us that there are two conceptions of nation: French and German. In French view the nation is a free choice, 'un plebiscite de tous les jours' (a daily plebiscite), in German view, the nation is a community of language and race. Between these two views should be no question of truth and error, because a nation simultaneously includes German and French ideas: it is always difficult amalgam of birth and freedom.[15]

Historically speaking a vertical integration has proceeded by an inclusion of more and more people to the process of political decision making in common affairs. It has not been an easy and smooth development, just the opposite. »Even some few nations,« reminds us Pomian, »which mainly achieved their horizontal unification at the moment of Napoleon's fall, had been far from being integrated vertically.«[16] During the 19th century European countries knew social and political upheavals and revolution, reforms and changes, by which citizens obtained more and more political, social, and cultural rights. »The international climate installed from 1870 on makes of achievement of vertical integration of nation the main strategic priority of each state of the industrialized Europe. Indeed, the political leaders from then on are quite aware of the impossibility to eliminate the social conflicts and, therefore, of the necessity to canalize them in a way that they no more endanger the national cohesion, which has to be reinforced at any price. Being tired of war they converted to the democracy. (...) Independently of their point of departure, the states, which act in this way, change their nature. They become the national states in a sense that they provide for the needs and interests of all classes, which compose the nation, as much as they express themselves in the Parliament and in the organs of opinion.«[17]

---

[14] P. Manent, idem, 96.
[15] See, P. Manent, idem, 99.
[16] K. Pomian, *idem*, 173.
[17] K. Pomian, *idem*, 185-186.

It would be very interesting for our topic to see at large extent how the Catholic Church has promoted this vertical integration by her action and teaching during this last period of process of formation of European modern nations. But having no time we must satisfy us with some glances at the Catholic teaching on human, civil, social and economic rights, whose satisfaction mostly coincides with a vertical integration of nations. Some quotation from *the Catechism of the Catholic Church* may illustrate the Catholic stance on this subject.

No. 1910: 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.

No. 1911: 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.«

No. 1912: 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.«[30] This order is founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love.

Let me finish with a remark about a relationship between a triumphant nationalism and Catholic Church. Because of more or less important role of each Church, Catholic too, has played in the horizontal and vertical integration in the process of formation of European nations it would be false to pretend they have nothing to reproach to themselves. Surely, Catholic Church as all others Churches has taken part in nation-building process and is therefore more or less, here and there responsible with all others factors for different forms of nationalistic pathologies. This fact has been already several times bitterly and sincerely regretted by the pope John Paul II.[18]

---

[18] See, L. Accattoli, *Quand le pape demande pardon*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1997.