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## **The Church's Relationship with Modern Democracy and Religious Pluralism According to the Document of the International Theological Commission "Religious Freedom for the Good of All": A Theological Analysis and Foundation of the Document**

*Odnos Cerkve do sodobne demokracije in verskega pluralizma v skladu z dokumentom Mednarodne teološke komisije „Verska svoboda za dobro vseh“: teološka analiza in temelji dokumenta*

*Abstract.* This paper explores how contemporary Catholic theology, in reflecting on the relationship between the Church and politics, especially modern democracy, has remained faithful to the openness of the Council and Catholic doctrine towards the world and positive yet specific collaboration with state and political structures. It also examines whether new impulses and directives for the otherwise complex relationship between faith and politics emerge from it, given the changed circumstances of the modern world, especially the emphasis on contemporary democracy and increasingly prominent religious pluralism. For this purpose, the paper deals with the theological analysis of the document of the International Theological Commission, "Religious Freedom for the Good of All: Theological Approaches and Contemporary Challenges", which presents critical reflections on the relationship between the Church and politics, especially democracy, in the modern world. After a detailed presentation of the content of this document in the first part, the second part provides a theological analysis, pointing out the main theological principles for defining the relationship between the Church and politics, specifically the Church and contemporary democracy, according to this document. From this, some conclusions are drawn regarding the fruitful and socially relevant life of Christians in the modern world, especially within democratic systems, as suggested by contemporary theology.

*Keywords:* democracy, religious pluralism, religious freedom, International Theological Commission

*Povzetek:* Prispevek raziskuje, kako je sodobna katoliška teologija pri razmišljanju o odnosu med Cerkvijo in politiko – zlasti v sodobni demokraciji – ostala zvesta odprtosti koncila in katoliškega nauka do sveta ter obenem pozitivnemu, a specifičnemu sodelovanju z državnimi in političnimi strukturami. Proučuje tudi, ali iz tega izhajajo nove spodbude in smernice za sicer (glede na spremenjene razmere v sodobnem svetu zlasti ob poudarku na sodobni demokraciji in vse bolj izrazitem verskem pluralizmu) zapleten odnos med vero in politiko. V ta namen je v prispevku teološko analiziran dokument Mednarodne teološke komisije „Verska svoboda za dobro vseh: teološki pristopi in sodobni izzivi“, ki prinaša kritične razmisleke o odnosu med Cerkvijo in politiko – zlasti demokracijo – v sodobnem svetu. Po podrobni predstavitvi vsebine tega dokumenta v prvem delu prispevka teološka analiza v drugem delu izpostavlja glavna teološka načela za opredelitev odnosa med Cerkvijo in politiko – zlasti Cerkvijo in sodobno demokracijo – v skladu s tem dokumentom. Iz tega izhajajo nekateri zaključki o plodnem in družbeno relevantnem življenju kristjanov v sodobnem svetu (zlasti v demokratičnih sistemih), ki jih ponuja sodobna teologija.

*Ključne besede:* demokracija, verski pluralizem, verska svoboda, Mednarodna teološka komisija

## 1. Introduction

At the Second Vatican Council, the Church strongly advocated for an open approach to the world and for cooperation with all societal actors committed to affirming human dignity and the value of the human person. In this context, the importance and necessity of dialogue between faith and politics – specifically, between the Church and various states and social systems – was affirmed. Approximately half a century later, the world is marked by significantly altered social and political circumstances, including the growing prominence of liberal and democratic political cultures, particularly characterized by pluralism and secularism. This raises the question of whether the Council’s approach to the relationship between the Church and contemporary political systems has been sustained or whether new pathways are being explored to achieve its fundamental goals.

Since theology, particularly the fruitful and open collaboration between theology and the magisterium, played a pivotal role in the Second Vatican Council’s reflections and the adoption of its significant and far-reaching decisions, this paper, in examining the modern relationship between the Church and politics, primarily turns to contemporary Catholic theology and its reflections on this subject. This approach presupposes theology’s ongoing importance both in shaping internal Church positions and in guiding the Church’s direct engagement with politics.

The study focuses on a highly significant document from the International Theological Commission, “Religious Freedom for the Good of All: Theological Approaches and Contemporary Challenges”. The document affirms contemporary de-

mocracy as a guiding principle but offers critical reflections on pluralism and secularism. Moreover, it provides key directives for the stronger promotion of human rights and the common good within democratic political systems. The aim of this paper is to elucidate the theological underpinnings of the document and the foundations of its content. Additionally, it seeks to evaluate the extent to which contemporary Catholic theology, in its exploration of the relationship between the Church and politics, has remained faithful to the Council's guidelines. Finally, the paper examines the new insights and directives that this document proposes, rooted in theological principles, for addressing the complex interplay between faith and politics amid the changed circumstances of the modern world.

In the first part of this paper, it is very important to present the aforementioned document in detail and critically, and in the second part, a theological analysis follows that explores the validity of the document's foundation in the theological doctrine of the Church. This foundation is sought in the revelation and Christian doctrine, from which certain concrete conclusions can be drawn for a fruitful and socially relevant life for Christians in the modern world. At the very beginning of the paper, as an introduction to the topic, the main characteristics of democracy as a political system are briefly outlined, and the question of the Church's reasonable sensitivity to its development and advancement is raised.

## **2. Democracy – The Modern Ideal of Political Order**

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The very etymology of the word (Greek δημοκρατία) clearly defines democracy as the power of the people. The archetype of democracy as a form of social governance is considered to be ancient Greece, particularly Athens. However, democracy in the sense of the rule of the people became a programmatic political concept only in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, the demand for democracy as a legitimate form of governance is widely accepted, and it is generally regarded as the ideal political system for communal life (Letto-Vanamo 2008, 649). The understanding of democracy in a given society depends on the fundamental social contract agreed upon by the majority, and on the interpretation of basic human freedoms that arise from that contract. Starting from the fundamental understanding of freedom as individual freedom, and accordingly, understanding the fundamental social contract as one that should protect the individual, democracy is understood as the rule of the majority within the framework of the rule of law that protects the rights of minorities and individuals. This distinguishes it from autocratic forms of governance, such as oligarchy and monarchy.

Democracy, therefore, is based on the principle that the sovereignty of governance belongs to the people, meaning that the people are the bearers of state power. In modern times, we can speak of plebiscitary or direct democracy, where the people directly decide on matters of communal life through referendums, and of intermediary or representative democracy, where elections determine who will hold direct power for a certain period. The fundamental distinctions within de-

mocratic systems are shaped by the different historical developments of certain societies and peoples, differing understandings of the human person and their defining characteristics, as well as diverse social and economic theories. Today, we speak of two main forms of democracy: liberal democracy and social democracy.

Although there are significant differences between them, both forms should, at their core, be founded on two principles: on the one hand, human freedom as a natural and inalienable right of the individual, aimed at organizing communal life in a way that preserves and supports this freedom, and on the other hand, the achievement of the common good for all people. When these values are distorted into extreme forms, we can speak of autonomy and individualism, which lean toward insensitivity to the social dimension, to others and to those who are different, and, on the other hand, of the emphasis on collectivism, which is susceptible to ideologies and leads to totalitarianism. Balancing these extremes or ensuring the rights of both the individual and the community is the task of the democratic state and its laws. These are also the conditions for internal and external peace and justice, essential for a tranquil life, which are likewise the concern of every state and its politics.

The Catholic Church has always been concerned with rights related to human dignity, human rights, and freedoms, particularly the freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. The Church clearly articulated its positions during the Second Vatican Council, especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World "Gaudium et Spes" (GS) and the Declaration on Religious Freedom "Dignitatis Humanae" (DH). From these documents, it is evident that the Church, although it does not explicitly mention political systems, values democracy as a kind of Christian virtue (even though Western liberal democracy cannot be directly derived from Christian roots). The Church has viewed democracy positively, as this form of governance has proven to offer the best possibilities for achieving a balance between protecting general justice and ensuring social protection for citizens. However, this does not mean that democracy is a perfect form of social organization. For democracy to function fully, it requires certain prerequisites: it demands active and free participation of citizens in political decision-making processes, as well as constant oversight of the government, and the free expression of opinions and positions on various matters of general importance.

Since a perfect form of social relations cannot be achieved, the Church and its theology remain vigilant regarding the realization of the proposed harmony, even when it comes to societies of established democracies or those that merely declare themselves as such. This vigilance and attentiveness of the Church is also evident in the document of the International Theological Commission (CTI)<sup>1</sup> on religious freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of the commission is "Commissio Theologica Internationalis".

### 3. Origin and Content of the Document "Religious Freedom for the Good of All"

The CTI chose to address this topic, choosing it from among five proposed topics presented by Gerhard L. Müller, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The members of the subcommission working on the drafting of the document were: J. Prades López, S.-Th. Bonino, K. Messan, L. Kpogo, M. M. McQueen, J. J. Park, B. Pottier, T. Rowland, P. Sequeri, Ž. Tanjić, and Ph. Vallin. The topic was discussed from 2014 to 2018, and the document was accepted by an absolute majority of all members. The then-president of the CTI, Cardinal L. F. Ladaria, after receiving a positive opinion from Pope Francis, approved the document and allowed its publication on March 21, 2019. The official text was published on the CTI website in Italian under the title "La libertà religiosa per il bene di tutti"<sup>2</sup>.

The document primarily addresses the issue of religious freedom as one of the fundamental human rights and highlights the importance of its protection in the modern world. Theologians analyze the theological, ethical, and philosophical aspects of religious freedom and call for dialogue between religions and cultures in order to make progress in realizing religious freedom. In advocating for this, they also touch upon certain principles related to political and social systems, particularly those of modern democracy.

#### 3.1 The Council as a Starting Point for Reflection

As the starting point for reflection in the first chapter, which is essentially a view of the current context, the conciliar "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (DH) is taken, with its position on religious freedom as an inalienable right of the individual, rooted in the dignity of the human person (DH, 2). The definition of the dignity of the human person is provided at the beginning of the most recent document by Pope Francis, "Dignitas Infinita": "Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights." (Pope Francis 2024, no. 1).

The CTI document greatly values the Council's contribution to the understanding of the human person and their inalienable worth, calling this discourse prophetic. Also, it acknowledges the greatly changed social and political circumstances of the contemporary world. It holds that, in the new circumstances associated with a liberal, democratic, pluralistic, and secular political culture, the concept of human rights and civil liberties must be redefined. In doing so, it emphasizes that the humanistic values of coexistence, individual dignity, and dialogue are rooted in Christian principles that contributed to their formation (no. 1–3).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, in addition to the original Italian text, we also use the German translation, published in the collection of all documents issued by the CTI to date. (Hallensleben 2022, 822–868) Numbers in parentheses within this paper refer to the paragraph numbers as listed in the official document.

Theologians are concerned on one hand by fundamentalism and the radicalization of religions, with their specific reactions to the liberal conception of the modern state, and on the other by the alleged ideological neutrality of contemporary political culture, which seeks to avoid any ethical and religious inspiration, imposing their exclusion from the public sphere and participation in the shaping of democratic society (no. 4–5). The CTI calls on civil society to overcome prejudices stemming from an ideological view of religion, and it urges religions to express their vision of reality and coexistence, which inspires them, in a language understandable to humanistic reason (no. 7).

It positively assessed the Christian rejection of exploiting political power, as is the focus of evangelization on the positive valorization of the context of religious and civil freedom of conscience. The proclamation of universal freedom and the universality of transcendent truth belongs to the nature of faith; therefore, Christianity is open to any search for truth and goodness that the history of culture develops in the life of peoples (no. 8). Thus, in the political and social life of nations, the deep connection between religious life and humanistic culture is recognized, and it is necessary to freely seek the most appropriate forms of their interaction (no. 9). In light of the signs of the times, the CTI recognizes the need to seek means and ways to deepen the current understanding of Christian thought, interreligious dialogue, and engagement with all forces of civil society. This is important both for state policies and for the Church. The inseparability of religious freedom and human dignity thus becomes the criterion for every just policy. Likewise, the Church, as a community of believers living in multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies, must safeguard the freedom of every individual for its own sake and due to the nature of faith. It must also be able to proclaim the faith under radically changed global conditions (no. 10). The document is therefore a theological-hermeneutical reflection that seeks to renew attention to the reception of the DH declaration and present reasons for the anthropological and political integration of the personal and social demands of religious freedom (no. 12).

The second chapter summarizes the main emphases of the Declaration “*Dignitatis Humanae*” (DH). Since DH is, in some way, the result of a maturing process related to the Church’s essence and its legally shaped relationship with the state, the CTI document first provides a brief overview and reflection on relevant Church teaching before the Council (no. 14–16), recognizing that the Church emphasized the importance of human dignity even before the Council. And at the Council itself, aside from the *Dignitatis Humanae* Declaration, this theme was also touched upon in the context of reflections on human freedom in the Pastoral Constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*”, especially in no. 26, but also in no. 11–22. The document then outlines the central statements of the conciliar declaration (no. 17–21). The declaration begins with a statement on the right of every human person to religious freedom. “This right of the human person to religious freedom should be recognized in the legal order of society in such a way that it becomes a civil right.” (DH, 2) The declaration then provides arguments for the claim that religious freedom is founded on the dignity of the human person, explaining their acceptance in the

light of divine revelation and their reception within the Church. It further examines the post-conciliar reception of the guidelines of the declaration (no. 22–26). It is noted that the principle of religious freedom is now indisputably defined in the modern world as a right of citizens and groups. However, there are still aspects that require further development and maturation, particularly concerning new threats to religious freedom that are taking on global proportions. Thus, the issue of religious freedom raises anthropological, political, and theological questions that are crucial for the common good and peace among nations, making it a foundation and source of political and social order in society. (no. 23–26)<sup>3</sup> It is emphasized that religious freedom is a fundamental right that every individual has the right to demand from the state, invoking their conscience and responsibility (no. 27–28).

### 3.2 Christian Anthropology and Fundamental Human Rights

The third chapter begins with Christian anthropology, which describes the human being as a relational being. From a Christian perspective, personality is always seen in conjunction with relationality as a fundamental characteristic of a spiritualized human being. Therefore, the dialogue surrounding the search for truth and the desire for communion is a responsibility of all in the process of realizing the rights of the human being, defined in this way (no. 29–30).

Fundamental human rights are grounded in the dignity of the human person, and among these is the right to religious freedom. The CTI advocates that there must be a general consensus on the criteria for realizing this right. Here, reference is made to the concept of the person as defined within the Christian theological tradition, which encompasses two aspects: one that points to the uniqueness of the person as a subject, and another that defines the person through their capacity to form relationships with others and be defined by those relationships. (no. 31–36). Through a summary of conciliar anthropology, the CTI once again illuminates the Christian criteria for recognizing the dignity of personality in every human being. Such human dignity is the foundation for building every human community (no. 37–39). This truth is communicated to the individual through the moral imperative of their conscience, on which the CTI here presents a concise Christian reflection. The right of a person to act in accordance with their conscience is then connected to human freedom. This freedom is integral to the definition and realization of personal human dignity. In line with this, the Church's teaching has always emphasized that freedom, grounded in the dignity of the human

<sup>3</sup> As an example of post-conciliar papal commitment to this topic, we cite the words of Pope John Paul II, who, in 1979 during the Third Latin American Episcopal Conference in Puebla, stated that human dignity represents a Gospel value that cannot be disregarded without gravely offending the Creator. This dignity is violated on an individual level when values such as freedom, the right to practice one's faith, physical and psychological integrity, the right to basic goods, and the right to life are not respected. It is also violated on a social and political level when individuals are unable to exercise their right to participation or are subjected to unjust and unlawful coercion or to physical or psychological torture... (III.1–2) When the Church is present in the defense or promotion of human dignity, it does so in accordance with its mission, which, while religious in nature and not social or political, cannot fail to consider the human person as a whole (II/1). (John Paul II., 1979)

person, is the foundation and source of all political and social order. This is an absolute and fundamental principle, in harmony with the principle recognized as a universal tenet of modern philosophy and politics: the human person must never be treated as a means, but always as an end (no. 40–42).

Following the emphasis on the right to religious freedom for every person, Chapter 4 elaborates on how this right also pertains to communities. Once again, the starting point is Christian anthropology and tradition, according to which the right to freedom, connected to the dignity of the human person, is realized in responsibility for the common good. In this sense, communities such as family, nation, and religion in some way precede the individual. In the context of the importance of community for the individual, the role of the state is also considered in terms of cultivating the private and subjective sphere. Its role is to ensure that existing differences are lived in a way that serves the common good (no. 43–44). In modern times, a profound crisis of institutions is evident, one that primarily affects the family and its humanizing role. The significant role of the state in safeguarding the family is emphasized. Religious communities are those that safeguard questions concerning the meaning of life, highlight the ethical and moral transcendence of the human person, protect individuals from nihilistic reduction to mere will and power, and guide them toward love as the pinnacle of human development (no. 45–46). The promise of salvation gives meaning to human life and prevents its reduction to individual and material needs. This is the broader social significance of religious communities. Belonging to such communities proves to be important for individuals and is, in fact, an essential part of their faith convictions. The safeguarded freedom of religion, a fundamental human right, cannot, therefore, be understood in an individualistic sense but as a freedom that flourishes through belonging to a community of believers. The state must adequately safeguard and guarantee this right. (no. 47–51)

Reflections on the social significance of freedom are further developed through considerations of the inclusion of social entities active in specific areas of civil society, which serve a mediating role between individual rights and state interests. In this context, the Catholic Church is highlighted for its contribution to the culture and ethics of public life, as well as its importance for the common good and the advancement of political humanism. In its governing function, the Church is not regarded as a competitor to the state. Once any possibility of reverting to theocratic symbiosis between Church and state is excluded, the CTI envisions the Church's role in implementing religious freedom and engaging in public life (no. 52–53).

### **3.3 Religious Freedom as a Theme for Re-examining Church-State Relations**

Chapter 5 explores the relationship between the state and religious freedom. Reflections on the relationship between Christianity and the state begin with the Old Testament Revelation, emphasizing that even in the Old Testament, obedience to God did not preclude obedience to legitimate earthly rulers. While political

institutions in all early cultures were rooted in theologically based culture, for the biblical people of God, obedience to God's commandments followed the logic of the Covenant. This logic presupposed individual freedom and emphasized that faithfulness to the Covenant and the Law, arising from this freedom, was continually reaffirmed by the promise that observing God's commandments would ensure the well-being of the entire nation. Throughout Old Testament history, a clear distinction was maintained between political power and religious institutions. Nevertheless, political rulers were obligated to align public life with fidelity to God and His commandments, particularly in practicing justice. The prophets condemned social injustice, political corruption, violence, and economic exploitation as betrayals of the Covenant with God. Thus, the reason attributed to political justice was understood as an integral aspect of divine law (no. 55–56).

This prophetic critique was adopted by Jesus from the very beginning of His proclamation, indirectly through His parables and directly through His condemnation of contemporary legalism. His proclamation presupposed a distinction between politics and religion. Similarly, the early Church did not question the fundamental legitimacy of political power nor its distinction from religious authorities. Power that served the people was understood as instituted by God; moreover, those who held political power and worked to establish a just order were viewed as instruments of God's care for His people. However, it was clearly emphasized that the Kingdom of God, which was inaugurated with Jesus, is "not of this world" (Jn 18:36), and that the logic of church leaders differs from that of political rulers, who "Lord it over the nations" (Lk 22:25). Political power is respected provided that political authority does not usurp the place that belongs to God alone. For Christians, it is indisputable that the highest obedience belongs to God alone (Acts 5:29). This obedience, realized in freedom, is an expression of the freedom of faith (1 Pt 3:14-17). It neither interferes with individual freedom nor threatens the public order of any community (2:16-17) (no. 57–58).

During the Roman Empire, Christians often bore witness to this stance of resistance to the imperial cults. The Gospels associate the exercise of civil authority with the obligation to do good for the benefit of the community, opposing any politics that seeks to replace faith. Under Emperor Theodosius (4<sup>th</sup> century), state laws regarding Christianity and religious freedom changed, resulting in a shift in the relationship between Church and State. This change led to the justification of the so-called *Christian state*, which discouraged religious pluralism, marking a significant departure from the previous paradigm.

Even after this shift, Christianity continued to strive to maintain the separation of political power from the spiritual authority of the Church. However, there remained a persistent danger: on one hand, the theocratic temptation to derive the legitimacy of secular authority from religious authority, leading to the exercise of political power in accordance with religious directives; on the other hand, the temptation for secular authority to subjugate the Church, reducing it to merely an organ or function of the state. Over the subsequent centuries from – the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> – efforts were made to establish a proper relationship between Church

and State. The prevailing view was that spiritual authority should be regarded as superior to political power, although there was also a concerted effort to establish a harmonious order between the two.

Finally, the Second Vatican Council put forth a proposal that preserves the autonomy of both the Church and the State, while clearly affirming their mutual interdependence. In line with the Constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*”, which advocates for the autonomy of both the Church and the State alongside their interdependence (GS, 76), CTI emphasizes the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the two and safeguarding their respective identities. In addition to the conciliar text of GS, the CTI also refers to a clarification issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on November 24, 2002, in the document “*Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*”, no. 6. This document reiterates the independence of the civic and political spheres from the religious and ecclesial domains, while acknowledging their mutual orientation toward one another. According to this arrangement, no state should impose specific religious beliefs or practices on its citizens, nor should it implement policies that substitute for faith and religion. Likewise, the Church is prohibited from intervening in political matters or decisions. However, the Church retains both the right and the duty to engage in public discourse and to express its stance on societal issues. Thus, Church and State should cooperate in serving the community, promote religious freedom as a universal good for society, uphold all human rights, and remain open to dialogue and collaboration (no. 59–60).

Religious life unfolds within the entirety of human life and is not separate from it. The Church’s social doctrine encourages a commitment to the common good within the secular realities of life, avoiding any suggestion of opposition between secular and spiritual spheres. The CTI underscores that the foundation of all authority is in God; therefore, authority must be measured against the standards of God’s justice. However, maintaining social and political order remains a human responsibility, and the CTI points to the precise boundary between the governance of earthly powers and the ultimate dependence on divine judgment. In this regard, both a theocratic and an atheistic state can be seen as fundamentally similar, as both replace God with ideology. The CTI draws an analogy between these extremes and the Christological heresy of Monophysitism, which erases the distinction between divine and human natures, united in the Incarnation yet harmoniously distinct. It is noted that this temptation toward *political Monophysitism*, a phenomenon known from Christian history, currently appears more often within certain radical movements of non-Christian religions (no. 61).

The CTI notes that such an *ethically neutral* state, which renounces ethical values under the pretext of neutrality, elevates itself to the position of a controlling authority and thus effectively becomes an *ethically authoritarian* state. By appealing to ideological neutrality, it imposes censorship on ethical judgments, thereby restricting freedom of conscience rather than protecting it. In the name of this so-called *state ethics*, the freedom of religious communities to organize according to their own principles is sometimes unjustly called into question (no. 62). More-

over, the CTI observes the danger of a certain indifference on the part of the state toward various approaches to shaping ethics and culture, or even an outright equalization of them. Invoking ideological neutrality often imposes censorship on ethical judgments, thereby restricting freedom of conscience rather than protecting it. Under the rubric of such a *state ethics* the freedom of religious communities to organize according to their own principles is sometimes unjustifiably questioned (no. 62).

It is noted that the moral neutrality of the state stems from varying conceptions of the modern liberal state. According to one such view, freedom can be politically guaranteed even without committing to a predefined concept of the good. State neutrality, in such cases, extends beyond guaranteeing equality before the law and excludes certain definitions of the good. This creates a secularist version of theocracy, as the state assumes the authority to determine what is deemed correct conduct and what is labelled heretical freedom. In this way, absolutism and ethical relativism are revealed as two sides of the same coin (no. 63). Unmasking this pretense of neutrality toward ethical values as an ostensible differentiation between communities fostering true freedom and those perceived as potentially harmful to social cohesion and the common good, the CTI highlights the illusion and ambivalence of morally neutral states. It calls attention to moral conscience, which is fundamentally oriented toward truth and the moral good. A conscience that recognizes its orientation toward the good as rooted in God simultaneously acknowledges an authority that precludes the instrumentalization of individuals by others. Where God is replaced by idols, the result is not the liberation of the individual but their enslavement. States claiming ethical neutrality enable the substitution of God with absolutist ideologies. (no. 64) This issue becomes especially significant for Christians when they are positioned as members of such allegedly neutral societies, experiencing their belonging to family and Church relegated to the private sphere while being expected to act as religiously and morally indifferent citizens in public. Acceptance of this division amounts to renouncing the right to religious freedom and freedom of thought. The CTI warns that Christians must never contribute to policies that, under the pretext of state neutrality or social pluralism, exhibit indifference to ethical norms. (no. 65)

The sixth chapter addresses religious freedom as a significant contribution to communal life and social harmony. It reflects on various aspects of religious freedom concerning its personal and social character. Practical issues regarding religious freedom in civil society are examined, emphasizing that this freedom must be regulated and protected by its institutions. The CTI warns that not all expressions of religious life can be valued equally. They must be assessed based on the extent to which they convey meaning and support to society as a whole and how much they contribute to the preservation of the common good as the supreme good. In this context, conflicts that disrupt peace and harmony in communal life are mentioned with concern, particularly the migration crisis caused by political conflicts and economic uncertainties. In an age of globalization, mutual responsibility transcends social differences and borders, as the problems affecting all can

only be solved collectively. Communal life is a dynamic reality, evolving and requiring political safeguarding. It is recognized that harmonizing the different dimensions of communal life is most successful when individuals live their faith and ethical convictions in a way that serves both their conscience and the common good. Religious communities should not operate as secret societies but must remain open. This openness is linked to the ongoing effort to enhance dialogue between religions and civil society, as it is in the interest of both parties to protect society from both indifference and radical relativism (no. 66–69).

It follows, therefore, that various forms of religious life must be critically examined based on their capacity to support the broader society and contribute to the preservation of the common good. Every religion must be able to responsibly meet the just and dignified demands of reason, while political authority must protect its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, from sectarian practices that exploit individuals under the guise of faith. Among the just demands of reason, the CTI recognizes the political and legal assurance of peaceful coexistence and mutual recognition of equal rights among different religions. This includes the right to freely leave a religious community and join another. Religious freedom should not be used to incite violence or discrimination against members of other faiths. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to protect minority religious communities. The reciprocity of rights means that the right to freedom of faith granted to a minority religious identity corresponds to the symmetrical recognition of the same rights for religious minorities in regions where that identity is predominant. Thus, the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, which served to halt religious wars during a certain period of European history, is transcended and replaced with a new principle that underscores the freedom of the individual and their conscience (no. 70).

The CTI observes that in many countries, religious freedoms are either completely suppressed or significantly restricted, making it impossible to speak of genuine freedom of faith, even in some nations that publicly declare themselves to be democratic. The limitation of religious freedom encompasses both the discrimination of individuals and the hindrance of Christian activities, so that it is difficult to claim true religious freedom if it does not include both an internal and an external dimension of life. The Church expects each state to protect the religious rights of its members, provided that these rights are in accordance with the rights of all other individuals. Situations are also foreseen where an individual, in order to remain faithful to their conscience, must oppose the laws of the state. Conscience is not bound by laws that are in contradiction to natural ethics, and the state must recognize the right of everyone to conscientious objection. (no. 71–72)

### **3.4 The Building and Safeguarding of Religious Freedom in the Mission of the Church**

In the seventh chapter, religious freedom, particularly the freedom of conscience, is presented as a central mission of the Church. This encompasses a commitment to a humanitarianism of mercy and a responsibility in educating future generations. The Church's connection with people in all their life circumstances is

emphasized, especially its dedication to the poor and the persecuted. The Church must avoid the temptation of compromising with the powerful to secure privileges solely for its own members. It must advocate for the religious freedom of all and for universal justice (no. 73–76). Interreligious dialogue is essential, as is the joint pursuit of the optimal shaping of the common good. Such dialogue does not compete with the Church's mission nor serves as an alternative to it. Therefore, the Church is ready for constructive dialogue with all who advocate for justice and brotherhood (no. 77–78).

This requires the courage of discernment. By respecting the religious freedom of all, Christians accept the theme of civil tolerance, while ensuring that it does not devolve into indifference toward their own faith. Faith must never become a threat to the religious freedom of others or lead to violence in the name of God. The CTI calls upon Christians to irrevocably renounce the ambiguity of religious violence and believes it is time for all religions to reflect anew on this theme. The quest for the full acceptance of the truth of one's faith and respect for others can also lead to a critical examination of one's own faith, which opens delicate issues of balance in the application of religious freedoms both before society and the religious community. Such issues demand personal maturity and a shared wisdom that is a gift from God Himself, and at times, martyrdom can be the ultimate expression of the Christian response to violence. Martyrdom replaces the spirit of vengeance and violence with forgiveness and love. (no. 79–82)

Finally, the conclusion of the document reiterates the Christian teaching that God's love is directed toward all people and the entire world, which corresponds to the mission of the Church focused on the logic of grace and freedom. In the pluralism of different traditions, institutions, and rights, the Church commits itself to serving the personal freedom of each individual and the common good of all, without undermining its fidelity to the event of salvation, which remains the central theme of the proclamation of faith. In this mission, it must maintain a lasting distance from the spirit of domination and attachment to power. Only from such a pure position may it admonish states to define a more coherent policy.

The document clearly identifies the contemporary temptation of mutual exploitation of political power and evangelical mission, which Jesus Himself rejected as a demonic seduction, and He warned His disciples about the danger of conforming to the criteria and style of earthly rulers (Mt 20:25; Mk 10:42; Lk 22:25). Such clarity demands full recognition of the dignity of confessing faith in the public sphere. Alongside all others, Christians are called to active cultural and social engagement in the service of the common good. For this reason, the state must not exclude the freedom to profess one's faith in the pursuit of the common good. It should not be indifferent to religious culture and religious affiliation, but should implement *positive secularism* toward social and cultural groups that ensure the rule of law in relation to the community to which that right belongs.

By defending the freedom of faith, Christianity lives the eschatological hope in the afterlife for all, as God has promised (Rev 21:1-8) and which is a gift of God's

love. The goal of humanity is realized in redemption, which transcends and fulfils all earthly things. Therefore, it is crucial for Christianity to exclude the folly of any kind of worldly messianism, as the absolutization of earthly power leads to the enslavement of nations and ultimately the destruction of the common home. Finally, at the end of the document, faith is expressed that we will all be judged according to our responsibilities, which encompass care for all of creation, entrusted to humanity from the beginning (Gen 1:27-28) and love for one's neighbor (Mt 22:39), which seals the evangelical truth of God's love.

#### 4. Theological foundation for the document "Religious Freedom for the Good of All"

It is clear from the presented document that the Church's theological stance toward any form of state policy, including modern democracy, is rooted in Christian doctrine about God, Christian anthropology, and, more specifically, Catholic ecclesiology.

What was already novel in the conciliar declaration DH is the fact that religious freedom is primarily grounded in the dignity of the human person, rather than, as before, in any primacy of truth. This stance is likewise emphasized in the CTI document, which upholds religious freedom as a right founded on dignity as the unconditional defining trait of every human being. Following this theological emphasis on the dignity of each individual, the call for the protection of religious freedom is not, and cannot be, a call for safeguarding an established state religion, nor exclusively for defending the freedom of the Church as an institution, but rather for securing the personal religious freedom of each individual. This theological position on the need to uphold religious freedom and freedom of conscience is thus extended unconditionally to all people and all religions. The absolutization of a *right to truth*, seen in earlier periods of Church history, sometimes led to an ideological stance within Catholicism, resulting in the political instrumentalization of the Church and the temptation to advocate for a confessional state, whose legitimacy was affirmed and derived from religious authority. This kind of state, at times, was subject to the directives of the Church hierarchy or, conversely, exploited the Church for its own ends. Such practices misused the Christian faith for religious-political ideologies, significantly harming the Church's true authority and mission.

The prominent Croatian sociologist of religion, Ž. Mardešić notes that, for example, in countries that have emerged from political systems in which religion was banned or repressed into privacy (examples are countries that have emerged from the communist system), Christians sometimes show tendencies towards fundamentalism and the fight against secularity. Religion is identified with a set of moral, social and political values that make up the identity of believers, and then such a system of values is tried (sometimes even combatively) to expand to national identity, society and political community. This leads to the equating of religious

identity with national identity and an increasing need for the political and social power of the Church, which is, of course, pure ideology and draws post-conciliar Christianity into heresy, such as the attempt of medieval theocracy (Mardešić 2007, 861–863). Conciliar and post-conciliar theology makes a notable shift from justifying a *Christian state* in the manner upheld in certain past eras and, by returning to the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, takes a step toward modern democracy and religious pluralism.

The theological foundation of every person's dignity is rooted in Divine Revelation, specifically in the revelation that humankind is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). This image signifies the boundless love of the Creator Himself. God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16; CCC, 218–221), and from His being as love flows His creative act, which is itself an act of love. "For God has no other reason for creating than His love and goodness" (CCC, 293). Humanity is created as the pinnacle of creation, "in His own image" (CCC, 355). Since humanity is thus created, "the only creature on earth which God willed for itself" (GS, 24), and "alone is called to share, through knowledge and love, in God's own life", this "is the fundamental reason for its dignity" (CCC, 356). Therefore, the value and dignity of the human person are not derived from any form of belonging or potential accomplishment but from the very nature of their being. This is, then, an ontological dignity, a gift of love from the Creator Himself.

The mystery of the Heavenly Father and His love, which reveals to humanity its true dignity, is made known to humankind through His Son, Jesus Christ. "In the mystery of the incarnate Word, the mystery of man truly becomes clear." (GS, 22; CCC, 359) According to Christian doctrine, the fullness of human dignity and exaltation is manifested precisely in the fact of Jesus's Incarnation – whereby God the Father sent His Son, who took on human nature and thus, uniting Himself in a certain way with each person (GS, 22), granted an immeasurable and indelible dignity to every human life through His Incarnation. By proclaiming the Kingdom of God to all, especially to those on the margins of society – those who, by human standards, were considered devoid of dignity – Jesus affirmed the Creator God's original declaration of the unconditional dignity of every human being.

Finally, the full confirmation of human dignity is revealed through Christ's Resurrection, which opens to each person the possibility of eternal communion with God. Thus, the Church, based on the revelation of God's universal love, grounds its view not only on the ontological dignity of every human being but also on each person's openness to the goal of salvation. Consequently, Christianity does not confine the history of salvation within the limits of the Church. All human history should be seen in the light of God's love, which desires that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4). In this way, through its eschatological hope and apostolic mission, the Church is, in the fullest and truest sense, catholic, directed toward all humanity. Hence, Catholic theology calls every individual to express their ontological dignity on both existential and moral levels and, within the freedom entrusted to them, to develop it toward its complete fulfillment.

The realization of the social conditions for all forms of human freedom, including religious freedom, is a fundamental task of state and political order, which the CTI document insists on. Human rights are rooted in the dignity of the human person; thus, they precede and stand above the state. No state has the authority to manipulate these rights at will but must instead respect, defend, promote, and build upon them. Catholic theology fundamentally holds that the person is not in service to the state; rather, the state exists to serve the person, and every political authority and system must be evaluated and continually directed according to this principle.

However, to be properly understood, rights and freedoms based on the dignity of the human person must be considered within the context of a broader social framework. This is especially crucial in the modern and postmodern era, marked by a noticeable disregard for social connectedness, obligations, and responsibilities, with a focus on rights and freedoms solely as individual entitlements. Some contemporary theologians, therefore, perceive democracy not merely as a characteristic of social and political organization but as an identity of the modern individual who, by absolutizing personal freedom, rights, institutional protections, and social guarantees, neglects their obligations to society and its institutions. This line of thought is reflected, for instance, in the writings of Italian fundamental theologian A. Matteo (Matteo, 2017, 155–181). Regrettably, modern Christians, too, are increasingly conforming to their time and becoming *democratic individuals*.

The Christian doctrine of God centers on the mystery of the Trinity, manifesting as a realization of God defined as love. This mystery is not merely an object of Christian theology but serves as its foundation and the environment from which it reflects on the overall reality. Thus, to think responsibly in a Christian sense means to contemplate all reality relationally, within a harmonious unity. This approach grounds Christian theology in the value of the individual's personhood and freedom, while also directing them toward social connectedness and community as the only possible setting for achieving the fullness of personhood. Personal rights and freedoms, therefore, entail dialogue, obligations, and a life lived for and with others. In this light, the CTI highlights the right to religious freedom but rejects its absolutization. All rights based on human dignity rest on a concept of freedom realized through responsibility for others and for the common good. Human dignity, when understood through the relational conception of the human person, excludes and restricts any individualistic understanding of freedom or any struggle for self-affirmation at the expense of the common good and the good of others. Within the context of each individual's belonging to the broader human community, even the right to religious freedom cannot be a right to absolute freedom. On the contrary, its very foundation implies its limitations; it must be realized only in synergy with the fulfilment of other human rights. Moreover, every form of human freedom – especially religious freedom – must be freed from selfishness, narrow-mindedness, irresponsibility, and any lack of compassion for others.

For example, acts such as taking human life in the name of religious conviction, religious persecution, religiously terrorism, prohibiting religious conversion, intolerance towards others, criminal acts, abuse, mutilation, coercion, manipulation, slavery, and any other practices that diminish or infringe upon human rights – especially those of the vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly, and the sick – cannot be deemed expressions of religious freedom or religious rights. Consequently, religious regulations must not override civil laws designed to protect human dignity and fundamental rights; rather, they should be aligned with them. Practically, this requires all religious communities functioning within modern democracies and seeking the state's protection for religious freedom to recognize the separation of religion from political authority and, therefore, to accept the principle of a secular state with its sovereign power to enact laws that safeguard individual dignity and communal life. The neutrality of the state should be understood as impartiality towards religions and religious beliefs, but not their separation from social life (Wolterstorff 1997, 115). The state, in turn, should evaluate and support these communities based on their contribution to the common good and the affirmation of each person as a dignified individual. Within the context of the modern understanding of democracy and secular political culture, this is particularly important with regard to the proper attitude of states towards those religious communities in which fundamentalist and sectarian elements are encountered, and which are not in line with civilizational achievements in matters of human dignity and rights and coexistence with others.

Furthermore, this stance is important for the internal purification of the Church itself and for maintaining its distanced relationship with all forms of state arrangements. Since the Church's primary mission is to proclaim the salvation that comes from the one true God and to lead humanity away from idols toward genuine faith, in the social-political realm, this implies that the Church should actively promote the desacralization of every political order, aiding secular society in freeing itself from any substitutes for religious experience within its structures. As the document points out, both theocratic and atheistic states represent equally flawed solutions, as each replaces faith in the true God with ideology. In other words, this commitment serves to realize an authentic ecclesiology, specifically the catholicity of the Church. By advocating for a secular state and the principle of separation between religion and politics, that is, the Church and the state, the Church is advocating for its freedom, which is essential to its Catholic authenticity and mission. This is important not only within the political formation of Europe, where Christians are at least nominally still the majority, or those parts of the world where Christians are the majority, but also for those regions where Christians are a minority (an example of theocracy in some Islamic countries). The Church, because of its catholicity, but also because of the principle of reciprocity, must advocate for the equal rights of all people in all social and state systems throughout the world, regardless of their faith. Only within such freedom can the Church fulfil its credibility and purpose. Every person must freely choose to follow Christ, without coercion from any general religiosity that is subject to customs,

traditions, or state or national pressures, nor driven by privileges from these sources. Only faith chosen personally can hold true, vital relevance.

Accordingly, in this document, the CTI addresses first Christians and then all religions, states, and political systems. The political dimension of religious rights and freedoms is given significant weight. Clear and unambiguous expectations are set for states and political systems to support, strengthen, and protect the religious freedom of each individual and all communities. This perspective is understandable given the Church's catholicity and its commitment to the welfare of all people. Throughout the document, it is evident that the Church advocates not only for the rights of Christians but that its positions are grounded in the very essence of the faith, specifically, in a life lived in relationship with God. This entails true reverence for God expressed through respect for each person as an image of God and a being worthy of God's friendship and love. Human dignity is a divinely bestowed value upon every person, rendering it inviolable and transcending all differences of gender, social status, politics, culture, and religion. In this light, the Church sees a democracy built on human rights and freedoms as the political structure that, in present circumstances, most effectively supports this truth, thereby contributing to universal peace and the realization of fundamental Christian values.

All theological positions and council directives are clear as principled stances, yet the CTI document emphasizes the need for an ongoing development of the faithful's awareness in line with these principles, especially in response to the changing conditions of today's world, marked by heightened globalization and significant migration prompted by political and economic crises. Viewed from this perspective, this represents a shift in paradigm—from a model of communal worship within a single nation, culture, or religion, toward the acknowledgment of God's presence in every individual as His beloved creation, which is a foundational theological postulate. Naturally, this shift also calls for a reimagining of the Church as a community of believers. Moving away from the pre-conciliar view of the Church as a "great people", a perspective that lingered even after the Council, the concept of the Church as a "little flock" and leaven in the world is gradually emerging. This world also includes those who hold different beliefs or no faith at all. In this context, "being a minority" becomes a new definition of the Church and an evangelical opportunity.

The principled emphasis on equal rights to religious freedom does not imply a simplistic equalization of all religious groups. According to this document, the aim is to acknowledge equal rights while considering the extent to which each religion contributes to the dignity of the human person and the common good. It is crucial to ensure that the recognition of equality does not suppress the diversity arising from religious beliefs and cultural distinctions. Such diversity remains an internal matter for religious communities and is appreciated as mutual enrichment. The role of the state is to respect the fundamental equality of rights while acknowledging natural, historical, and socially conditioned religious pluralism. Thus, the state must ensure that all religious and cultural differences serve the common good and, by this criterion, provide institutional support.

For such coexistence, in addition to positive state laws, dialogue and mutual understanding among believers are essential, as they also foster a deeper knowledge of one's own faith through comparison with others. Interreligious dialogue is not merely about human friendship or a civilized respect for others and their differences; rather, it requires believers to be convinced in their own faith, which involves a genuine engagement with the question of truth before opening to dialogue with others. In dialogue with Jews, for Christians, this centers on the question of Jesus' resurrection; in dialogue with Muslims, it is the question of Jesus' divine sonship; with both, the nature of the Holy Trinity remains an open topic. Such dialogue requires faith that, along with internal conviction, demands understanding and knowledge. Of course, alongside these theological themes, interreligious dialogue also addresses broader questions of coexistence and social and political structures that allow all to live peacefully and well, ensuring the preservation of the Earth and other creatures and caring for our shared future.

## 5. Conclusion

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The document "Religious Freedom for the Good of All" does not aim to provide a detailed analysis of the political and ecclesial interpretations of the theme of religious freedom, but it offers a valuable reflection on the contemporary relationship between the Church and politics. In this sense, it serves as a resource for Christians living their faith in the modern world within the various states and political systems, extending an invitation for open dialogue to all governments and policies that prioritize similar values. Rooted in revelation and Christian teaching, the document seeks to interpret these foundations within the changed conditions of today's world. This is not an expression of theological relativism, but rather a realistic approach to the global context and the pursuit of coexistence. The discourse conveys the conciliar position of openness on the part of the Church towards the world and an appreciation of civic and secular values. There is an emphasized awareness that Christians do not live in isolation from the world, but rather as citizens of the world, in specific nations, and under various political structures, sharing life with all others and participating in a common destiny.

In addition to addressing Christians, it addresses to states and governments, particularly concerning the clarification of the relationship between the Church's self-understanding and that of the state, a relationship that does not always proceed without conflict across all political systems. It emphasizes the necessity of religious and political dialogue and cooperation, with the shared goal of achieving complete humanity, while clearly delineating the nature and scope of these two realms. Expectations of the state are framed in terms of the explicit protection of religious rights and freedom of conscience, as well as the equal treatment of religious communities that contribute positively to the common good. The freedom of every person, especially religious freedom and freedom of conscience, serves as the measure by which the dignity and value of each state and political order

are evaluated. Human freedoms arise from the ontological dignity of the human person, which is a postulate of Christian doctrine on God and Christian anthropology. Based on this dignity and the rights that proceed from it, Catholic theology supports religious and cultural pluralism as a characteristic feature of contemporary democracy.

While it values democracy as a political system more capable of protecting human dignity and one that has made significant progress on a global scale, theology does not see it as the fully perfected form of communal life. It views it as an open process that still reveals deficiencies and crises, and in which intervention from various instances is both allowed and necessary. This understanding establishes both the right and the duty of Christians to actively participate in social and political life. Human rights and freedom come with corresponding responsibilities. The right to personal freedom and resistance against illegitimate and inhumane structures, manifesting most profoundly in freedom of conscience, must be connected with the duty to oppose these same injustices. Indifference to such responsibilities, a type of civic apathy or sectarian withdrawal into religious communities without broader social awareness, contributes neither to personal growth nor to the common good, and should not be the stance of believers. Thus, in advocating for the right to religious freedom, the Church educates the faithful for greater maturity in their own Christian conscience and strives to foster a space for believers' contributions within all human societies and political systems.

Through this line of thought, Catholic theology does not aim to cast doubt on the fundamental principle of a secular democratic state. Rather, it aims to enhance a proper understanding of secularism, freeing the state from any surrogate forms of religiosity within its framework. If the separation of religion and politics is understood as excluding religious content from public discourse, such secularism would, in itself, be a dangerous ideology. According to the CTI, all expressions of faith that contribute to the good of each person and to universal human fraternity should be included in public discourse as equal contributions to its development. The rule that forbids Church officials from engaging in politics cannot be used as an argument to deny all believers the competence and right to participate in political life.

The document affirms that all the Church's positions regarding the world, states, and political systems are rooted in theology: the doctrine of God, specifically Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, Christian anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. The Church's theology begins with the revelation of God, who is love in Himself, and from that love, He creates humanity in His own image. Consequently, the Christian anthropology derived from therein views the human person both in terms of individuality and in communion with others. In line with this, the Church's approach to states and political systems starts with the individual person, but it also seeks to consider and address politics on a global scale. In this light, the CTI document aims to guide the perspective and responsibility of states, nations, and political systems away from narrow domestic policies and individual foreign strategies toward a global worldview and approach to policy. This stance

is rooted in the belief that only global human solidarity can fulfil the full potential of humanity, universal peace, fraternity, and solidarity among peoples, as well as mutual aid, particularly in times of crisis or existential threats to life. Only a comprehensive and solidaristic policy, which might also be referred to as a form of global democracy, can fully justify its mission in the service of the complete realization of human dignity.

## Abbreviations

- CCC – Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994.  
 CTI – Commissio Theologica Internationalis [International Theological Commission].  
 DH – Second Vatican Ecumenical Council 1965a [Dignitatis humanae].  
 GS – Second Vatican Ecumenical Council 1965b [Gaudium et spes].

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