Democratisation of a Hierarchical Religion: the Roman Catholic Church in the Time of a Credibility Crisis Caused by Sexual Abuse Misconduct

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Abstract

This paper reflects, from a sociological perspective, on the nature of authority in the Church and on the modes of governance and character of the internal self-organisation of the institution of Roman Catholicism. Historically there are no restrictions to democratisation of the Catholic church. On the other hand, at the time of a credibility crisis the necessity for accountability strengthens the trend towards wider forms of democracy. The efficiency and integrity of Catholicism demand transparency of structures and accountability of leaders, who have frequently, especially in Ireland, failed in their supervision by mishandling and covering up abuse cases.

Keywords: democracy, religion, Catholic church, abuse, sexual scandals, accountability

In substance, the Catholic Church takes a neutral line on forms of state regime. The primordial and later on institutional Catholicism has made its way under various types of empires, absolute or constitutional monarchies, feudal systems, and even totalitarian regimes. Politics and formation of social order are not focal goals of Catholicism, but its religious mission, or function and communication, as Niklas Luhmann argues, come first.

Consequently, no system of governance is intrinsically good or bad in itself, unless a political order is suitable for a development of human religious life. At the social (and ethical) level hence it is a question of whether the instruments of power are exercised for the common good. Since the beginning of systematic Catholic social ethics in the late nineteenth century, however, the Church has moved increasingly

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closer to asserting that democracy not only is consistent with the principle of the common good but is the best known system of transferring power, it promotes the participation of citizens in political life, “guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them”\(^2\). In general, democracy is recognised as a device of empowerment to ‘subjectivity’ of society while it strengthens and expands structures of participation, sense of belonging, and collective responsibility. Democratic system allows the fullest application of the principle of people’s sovereignty\(^3\). Nonetheless, a democratic political system is applicable only externally, to a state or other form of social structure but under no circumstances internally, as a mean of organizational model to the institutional church itself.

This paper reflects, thus, from a sociological perspective, on the nature of authority in the Church and on modes of governance and character of internal self-organization of the Roman Catholicism’s institutions. The author of the research recognizes that the matters of organizational models, authority, and governance are historically reliant to outer secular culture and moderately responsive to changes in non-church (non-ecclesiastical) culture. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, such external influence and demand, within the Western culture in particular, is characterized by a democratic imperative, expectations of participation in decision-making and ruling, requirement of leaders’ accountability, and at the time of legitimization crisis, as Jürgen Habermas claims\(^4\), democratic and participatory re-founding of the origins to any type of social order. Under the pressure of the crisis of credibility and decay of reliability, caused by very recent abusing scandals and perpetrators’ covering-up mishandling by the church leaders is appropriate to consider the ways in which the Roman Catholic church is attempting to redefine (unless it is still defending to maintain, as a “fortress church”, its salient traits untouched by modernization) its position and task in the contemporary social order.

To evaluate the matter of democratization of the church structures it is essential to make a consideration of three elements in such an order: 1) meaning of democracy as not merely a procedure of voting and electing but also as a social system and a mean of legitimization; 2) hierarchical-democratic aspects of church authority and governance in a historical glimpse; 3) challenge of accountability as an outcome of the latest abuse crisis based on the case of Ireland.

1. Democracy within the framework of an institutional religion

The question of how religious traditions affect the possibility of efficacious democratization has been debated for a couple of decades. A vast literature has analyzed relations between religions, among them Christianity in particular, and political culture