



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF PAUL VI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 60th ASSEMBLY
OF THE WORLD INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION***

Saturday, 23 September 1972

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting gives us a double satisfaction. In the first place, we like to see, in your step, a testimony to the action of this Apostolic See, and of the Catholic Church, in favour of peace in the world. Your visit offers us, moreover, a really exceptional opportunity to propose certain reflections to a group of highly qualified personalities, invested with responsibilities that are as noble as they are important, since they concern political action, the essential aim of which is the implementation of the common good.

We do not think it is necessary to linger over description of the elements that compose this common good, for each people as for the whole human family. Your participation in an international gathering shows, in fact, that you are fully aware of the tie between the common good of one nation and its fulfilment at the world level. How could it be otherwise, since some of its elements belong to the patrimony of universal values, which we find affirmed, in an explicit or implicit form, in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man accepted by everyone – or nearly everyone – , at least on the plane of principles.

In his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII declared in this connection: «It is agreed that in our time the common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore be to ensure that these rights are acknowledged, respected, coordinated with other rights, defended and promoted, so; that in this way each one may more easily carry out his duties» (n.60). This affirmation has lost nothing of its value; but if the rights of the person, considered in the abstract, remain invariable, their concrete content must be determined according to the diversity of situations, that is, from people to people, and within the

same people, from one moment to another of their life, from one period to another of their history.

It is the same for political action which, by definition, is not developed in the abstract, but in contact with concrete human reality to make its mark on it. So this reality must be considered with the greatest attention, in order to be exactly understood in its present existence, in its constant evolution, in all its dimensions, in its demands of the present moment, in the needs felt today, taking into account the aspirations and expectations of the men on whom it is exercised, through the increasingly complex network of relations set up by these same men. For, we need not remind you, political action is carried out in the concern to contribute to the satisfaction of these needs and demands, to give a positive answer to these aspirations and expectations, to develop the quality of the relations to make them more carriers of human values.

A political action that is detached and, as it were, extraneous to the human reality on which it claims to exercise itself, is no longer political action: it is an action in a vacuum, with the dangers that this vacuum calls. Never are citizens so much aware of the necessity, the fruitfulness and the nobility of political action as when the latter begins to lose its identity or actually, already lost it. And yet the observer of the contemporary world is forced to recognize certain facts: important changes are taking place, particularly in the conception and the role of Parliaments.

Everyone, knows the main functions that constitute the traditional activity of Parliaments: representation of the country and of the national society in its diversity; control of the exercise of government authority; collegial deliberation on the life of the nation; information of the public; in many cases, the creation or participation in the creation of government authority; finally the legislative function, originally the most important function, to the extent that Parliament is called the "legislative power". These functions are exercised in different ways according to conception that the executive power has itself of its responsibility and electoral systems; according to the civic sense of the Members of Parliament; according to the conception that the executive power has itself of its responsibility.

It is these different functions that the transformations of society today concern, in different ways, of course.

The tendencies of evolution are not univocal. In such cases, Parliament has a quite preeminent place in the functioning of powers. Some people point out, however, that the use sometimes made of this preeminence may lead to the weakening and even to the helplessness of the whole political organism. In fact, the contemporary difficulties of reaching national consensus affect the capacity of Parliament; although it is its responsibility, to give sufficient stability and authority to the, governmental power, particularly when it is itself charged with establishing it. Too weak and jeopardized, the executive power cannot then carry out sufficiently the task which the Constitutions, recognize it as having and which the peoples rightfully expect of it:

Some people would like to see in other tendencies and other examples the signs of a decline in the role and authority of Parliament to the advantage of the executive power. In its very functioning, they say, Parliament has often given proof of its inefficiency, showing itself incapable of defining and promoting the real good of the country, beyond the divisions of political parties and the play of particular or local interests. Parliament, in their opinion, is unfit to bring about the «consensus» of a nation and to sustain a legitimate continuity of governmental action. The consequence of the mistakes made is a weakening of the parliamentary institution.

The attempt is even made to justify this weakening on the grounds of the deep changes in political and social life that cannot be ignored: these changes, it is asserted, lead necessarily to transformation of the parliamentary function itself.

To what extent, for example, does Parliament fulfil today the function of representing the nation? Liberal democracy, while proclaiming the equality of all citizens, does not actually implement: this equality on the economic and social plane: there is a gap, it is alleged, between Parliament and the real people. The latter, aware of this lack, then looks, it is pointed out, for new ways of representation, which it considers more authentic: trade unions, professional organizations, different associations. It is true that the latter may turn out to be more efficacious, better organized and nearer the concrete problems of men. In this way intermediary bodies, too much neglected in representative democracy, come into their own again.

Is it not the duty of the State, people add, to intervene in the economic and social field? Before the technical nature of the new questions, Parliament no longer seems able to intervene efficaciously, for lack of competency and rapidity of reaction. Too slow, badly equipped, too numerous and often encumbered with formalistic procedures, parliamentary assemblies, it is said, permit the extension of the field of intervention of the executive power, surrounded as it is by technocrats and modern methods of action.

Finally, a parallel is drawn between Parliament's function of informing the public and the multiple blossoming of other centres of discussion and deliberation: press conferences, T.V. debates, various congresses, soundings of opinion. Through the media of social communication, the Government can directly contact the whole of the country and push its advantages over Parliament still further.

It must needs be granted that the place of Parliaments in public life has deeply changed in the course of a century. Nearly everywhere a crisis of function and identity can be seen. In any case it is difficult to see why the scientific revolution into which our modern societies entered and which is completely transforming the instruments of social, economic and cultural life, should leave the instruments of political life in their present forms.

And how could the diversity of points of view, a fruit of the great variety of social and professional

situations, of the multiplicity of ideologies, and, no less, of the multiplicity of partial knowledge, limited sometimes to a tiny part of the whole, how could this diversity fail to make it difficult to achieve a national agreement sufficient for the harmonious functioning of Parliaments?

Are there remedies for this crisis, Ladies and Gentlemen? We have not the technical competence to present them to you; we will be content to pursue in your presence the reflections that our meeting has suggested to us.

No one should doubt, it seems to us, the salutary role of an institution such as Parliament to safeguard democracy. It falls to it to balance the executive power, the field and the attributions of which may tend to expand, and to play a compensating role with regard to the new technocratic power, the influence of which is growing continually. Without denying the positive aspects of the instruments of direct democracy such as new formulas of concerted democracy, in which the government endeavours to establish a dialogue with the «living forces» the nation, it is difficult to see the advantages of abandoning the way of representative democracy. It is necessary, however, to find methods of exercising it in keeping with the requirements of modern society and to proceed with the adapted renovation that is required.

One of the social phenomena to which we desired to draw attention in our Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Roy, last year, is the double aspiration to equality and to participation, which we presented as «two forms of the dignity of man and of his freedom»(n.22). The present-day world, so strongly opposed to formalism, questions a system which, it is said, fails to guarantee representation of certain acts of its concrete life, by means of a constant dialogue, a more immediate and continuous presence. As pointed out above, the gap between the people and Parliament, or even more the disappearance of the latter – creates a vacuum which calls either authoritarian or even dictatorial regimes, or revolutionary convulsions, spontaneous, or prepared clandestinely, which, you will agree, is not without danger for the public good.

To forestall these dangers, it is therefore the duty of the parliamentary institution to surround itself with competent means and give proof of its efficacy. It will win recognition, in fact, both from the Government and from public opinion, to the extent to which both experience the thoroughness of its knowledge and its debates.

The main goal that must emerge from the confrontation of perspectives must be, it should be repeated, the common good of the nation. Who could deny that, too often ideological conflicts, partisan quarrels, desire for prestige, priority defence of particular interests, short-sighted views and personal motivation have influenced deliberations, to the detriment of the authority of Parliament and parliamentarians? That is why, in the present crisis more than in any other moment, a high level of collective and individual morality is necessary, as well as awareness of a common responsibility with regard to the future of the nation and the determination to arrive at a national consensus. The member of parliament must appear as the artisan of the good of all and

not as the spokesman of a clientele. Resisting the pressure of groups of private interests, more or less legitimate, the ambition of which is sometimes to annex power to their advantage, without, however, losing touch with the living forces of the nation, the member of parliament must try to satisfy all the needs of the people, with particular attention to under-privileged and silent categories, even if of least electoral weight.

It would also be necessary to recall the place of the opposition in a parliamentary regime, with its rights, in the limits of what is just and, honest, to expression, to the normal exercise of its participation in the mission of government control, to informing public opinion. If these rules are forgotten, does it not lead, almost inevitably, to recourse by the opposition to secret means to get their points of view accepted, to the great detriment of the normal institutional mechanism?

How could we fail to point out the growing importance of new ways of representation, in which citizens are grouped in order to express their immediate interests, their ideological choices and their future plans? Such groups are legitimate when they conform to democratic rules. Without for that reason yielding to demagogical pressure or abdicating its authority or its high responsibilities as defender of the good of everyone, is it not in the interest of Parliament to become aware of their weight, open a dialogue with them, follow their quests, understand their aspirations in order to help them to reach the legislative plane?

We would not like to end without telling you one of the most ardent wishes of this Catholic Church which has members all over the world and towards which there converge the expression of the confusion and hope of a large part of mankind.

We expressed this wish recently to the Secretary General of CNUCED on the occasion of the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Trade and Development: "We would like, we wrote, the voice of the neediest to be heard, the voice of the hundreds of millions of men, women and children living outside modern economy, often suffering from disease, malnutrition, poor housing and working conditions, underemployment, illiteracy and all the other evils that prevent them from fully participating in human condition, which is the same for everyone" (L'Osservatore Romano, 15 April 1972).

We are taking the liberty of making the same recommendation to you, members of parliament from so many nations in the world, so that, attentive to the solidarities that are being established more and more between members of the same nation and members of the whole of mankind, you will work to reduce the unjust economic, social and cultural disproportions by a generous contribution to the national and international efforts carried out for this purpose. Is not our humanity in the throes of a ferment urging it to reconsider the relations between individuals, groups and peoples in order to make them more in conformity with the demands of justice and the dignity of the person? Are not your interparliamentary Conference in Rome, and our meeting today, a sign of this, just as the subjects of your agenda bear witness to it?

We are all the more insistent in that the human family has not yet at its disposal adequate means to carry out efficiently an action that would meet the requirements of the present time. It would be to misunderstand us to see in this reflection a lack of consideration for the organizations already existing. We have given, and continue to give, unmistakable signs of our great appreciation for the work they are carrying out, the fruits of which are not always apparent to a hasty judgement.

Nevertheless, international reality is what it is: these institutions have at their disposal the power and the means that the member states kindly grant them. This underlines sufficiently the responsibility of the politicians whose task it is to regulate the relations between peoples or to represent their country within these organizations. The march of our world towards progress and unity demands that particular views and desires for hegemony should give way to contribution to implement the universal common good.

These politicians must be clearly convinced that the public good of their people cannot be authentic unless it results, at the same time, in a benefit for other peoples and the human family. This earth, which is "one", asks to be no longer exploited selfishly or arbitrarily, but to be loved by one and all for the good of one and all.

In conclusion, we express to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, our conviction that Parliaments have still an important role today. They are, in fact, the only place where group conflicts can be solved by law, and a just law, if it is correctly conceived and applied – and it is still the noble role of Parliament to see that this is done – guarantees in the long run the equality and the participation to which our contemporaries aspire, as it were, irresistibly. Parliament, by allowing democratic life to take place – in its own ranks and at other levels – fosters peaceful effort, life and confrontations in a concern for better justice. The moment really seems to have come for political action to safeguard these values and operate the desired revisions.

Only the future will tell if this opening of the parliamentary institution to certain questions will dispense society in gestation from experimenting new mechanisms, institutions and systems of representation.

Our wish to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, and to all your colleagues is that your activity may be carried out in the direction' of the good of the men who have 'shown their confidence in you by giving you the task of representing them. In that case it will certainly be the bearer of welfare, justice, progress and peace. We likewise assure all believers of our prayer that Almighty God may assist them with his light and his strength.

*ORa n.41 p.4, 5.
