



# WHAT POLITICAL COMMITMENT FOR CHRISTIANS?

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The political commitment of Christians in our liberal democracies is not at all obvious, so much so that these democracies oppose the teachings of the Church on many subjects.

Let us first bring to mind the context. Christians cannot be indifferent to politics, understood as a form of higher charity. But in our societies, Christianity is now in the minority and rejected as a public reference. It has therefore become difficult to have an influence by explicitly claiming it. And yet Christians cannot blend anonymously into society. Indeed, they cannot avoid speaking up and becoming visible, if an issue at hand is directly religious. But even if it is a matter of natural law, and when it is unknown to society (marriage for all), Christians are quickly identified as such. The old dilemma is therefore not very helpful—one will always act "as a Christian," obviously, but also in each case "inasmuch a Christian" without exclusion a priori.

Does the Magisterium give a clear answer as to the directions to take? The principles (the Social Doctrine of the Church) are solid. But the political position has varied considerably—at first hostile to political modernity (19th century), it then oscillated, at least until the Second World War, between restating the principles and a de facto accommodation. Then it tried Christian democracy, which seemed a convenient and promising compromise, but which finally failed, leading to the present position. If it can be summarized, the Doctrine seems to recommend democracy and human rights, like the rest of society—but (at least for John Paul II and Benedict XVI) with an underlying understanding that is quite different from the prevailing one, and more than a little nuanced between the popes. In any case, it is not disrespectful to say that the impact over time has been and remains inconclusive. The only clear case of success, that of John Paul II in the East, was no ordinary political struggle.

It should be remembered, moreover, that the Magisterium exercises its full authority only on faith and morals (the moral foundations), not on decisions of political prudence. The light it sheds is therefore very important, but it leaves open various possibilities, while remaining faithful to the principles. This does not mean that magisterial teaching should be neglected—far from it. But it is not a ready-made manual. This fact is often forgotten when positions taken here and there in the Church are taken without caution. Conversely, it is difficult in practice to claim to be a Catholic in politics while going against this or that expression of the Church of the moment, even if one remains within the legitimate margin of autonomy. For example, a party claiming to be Catholic but restrictive on migrants would probably be criticized in an uncomfortable way.

## What References in the Past?

Do we have references in the past? Less than we think. The era of Christianity was too different. Christian democracy did not survive and was a flash in the pan—in a way correlated with the illusion, common at the time, that there was a misunderstanding with the modern world, which just had to be dispelled. But what has emerged is that, as the popes of the nineteenth century perceived (despite their errors and blunders), there are elements of strong and structural opposition between this world and the Christian. In the end, the model of the first Christians seems more inspiring. It is true that there was no democratic political struggle in the Roman Empire, but the dilemma was already known—not to deny the society in which one lives and its elements of legitimacy, while recognizing points of irreducible opposition. And within this framework, the positions could be diverse. Thus, the question of the Roman army—some thought that it was out of the question to fight in it; others made the opposite choice, without denying their faith.

This does not tell us what choices should be made concretely. All the more so since the Christian world is divided politically, with, to simplify things, a basic polarization between "conservatives" and "progressives." The former are more numerous and transmit the faith better; but the latter, although weakened, hold more levers. That said, the Catholic spectrum thus drawn does not merge with the political spectrum in society, as it is significantly more skewed to the right. The "progressive" Christian is very rarely on the extreme left: he or she will be an ecologist or a Socialist Party member, but often [LREM](#) or even [LR](#), like the majority of practicing Catholics. The "conservative" Christian is readily classified by the system as being on the right, or even on the extreme right.

These oppositions also seem irreducible; first of all, of course, on questions of morality and society. In theory, the Doctrine gives clear-cut answers. But not everyone adheres to them (contraception); and the question of what is possible remains open; and thereafter, the division is often sharp (marriage for all). Then there are the migrants. The disagreement between Christians is very bitter here, with the current pope having moreover committed himself radically to one side. Less harsh, but nevertheless clear, is the opposition on Europe and more broadly on the national question. Finally, in the vast field of economic and social issues, including ecology, there is a very wide range of opinions, with considerable differences. This simple reminder shows that it is not possible to unite under one banner the positions in question, whether explicitly Christian or not.

In such a context, frustrations are inevitable on both sides; and not only because the Magisterium

seems to support some over others. The "progressive" side suffers from the retreat of this current compared to the 1970s and 1980s. Above all, since the opposition between the dominant spirit of our societies and the Christian faith is denied or relativized, we end up in the wake of the former; and, in practice, the political action we carry out is confused with that of the left or the center. Moreover, the committed progressive is troubled by the right-wing vote of the majority of Catholics, as well as by the insistence of the "conservatives" in regards to matters societal, which is much more visible and the only one associated by the public with Christianity.

Finally, there is difficulty with a magisterial doctrine that remains traditional (despite certain declarations). Hence the temptation of an exacerbated ethic of conviction, notable on the subject of migrants—but there again without any political effect of its own.

The malaise is no less real on the "conservative" side. This may be because of the fact that they are out of step with the hierarchy—not so much on principles as on certain declarations, such as on migrants—but even more so because of frustration over the poor results obtained, for example in societal struggles. This is because we are opposed to the heavy tendencies of society, the relativist paradigm that dominates it. Moreover, on this side also Christian discourse is in the minority, although less than on the left.

The balance sheet therefore does not appear to be encouraging. One can recognize an ardent obligation as a Christian, but in practice it is difficult to implement it in a way that can be identified in Christian terms; the dispersion of efforts is considerable; and the political field does not immediately appear to be fruitful for the Christian who wants to act explicitly as such. But it would be wrong to leave it at that. First of all, of course, what makes an action good or bad is not primarily the result obtained—which for the most part depends on God. It is not up to us to carry the future of humanity on our shoulders; this does not prevent us from doing what we have to do, where we are and where we can; and if possible, intelligently. Doing good around us, including in political matters, is always possible, and obtaining real results, and by making explicit how this manifests our Christian faith whenever possible or pertinent.

Another thing is the manifestation of Christianity in society and in history. Let's look at its lessons—how many cases of collective successes are there that are the fruit of Christian action, consciously and in principle? I am, for example, one of those who admire Christianity in spite of its defects and limitations; but it was never defined as an objective to be reached; it was given in its time. It will be the same in the future.

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*Featured image: "Christ Before Pilate," Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, 6th century.*

