



Towards a Participatory Society: New Roads to Social and Cultural Integration



Plenary Session 28 April-2 May 2017 – Since the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis has asked our Academy to give more attention to the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the suffering, and to make a renewed commitment to fight all forms of social marginalization and exclusion. This Plenary will respond to his call by seeking to deepen our understanding and explanation of the reasons for social exclusion and, above all, to suggest practicable steps for promoting a thorough-going social and cultural integration, which we have termed the ‘participatory society’. Unlike other meetings that are focused on particular problems, this Plenary will address the topic from the broadest vantage point, emphasizing new ways to promote the full participation of people in society, meaning participation in all spheres of civil and political society. The aim is not only to make the current structure of societies more participatory, but also to outline the characteristics of a participatory society capable of promoting the dignity of the human person in a context oriented to the common good and based on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. One aspect has to do with dissatisfaction with existing ideas for progressive social transformation that are incapable of avoiding recurring processes of exclusion and marginalization of entire populations, generations and social groups on a world scale. The other aspect is the need to develop a genuine concept of participation in social life and highlight the best practices that can lead the society toward a good life for all in the different realms: in the economy, in the political institutions, in the cultural dynamics that are now heavily influenced by the spread of information and communication technologies.

Through such research, we do not pretend to be elaborating a new empirical model of participatory society. Instead, our aim is rather to highlight the structural elements that would enable any given social system to develop into a more participatory community. Such a development can only be initiated by a conversion of minds. No external coercive power can create participation. As participation is an inherent quest deriving from the social nature of all human beings, it can only grow from an appropriate anthropological background. Lack of participation in economic, cultural, social life is a consequence of according little consideration to human dignity. Here, the Social doctrine of the Church gives us a serious impetus to rectify this deficiency, one that generally receives lesser attention in current social and economic analysis. Participation is a moral value and a principle in ordering human societies. It stems from the internal quest for social change.

As Pope Francis reminds us: “A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity. Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community.” (*Laudato Si’*, #144). The participation of all interested parties entails being fully informed about the projects of economic, social, cultural and political initiatives and their different risks and possibilities. This includes not just preliminary decisions but also various follow-up activities and continued monitoring. Honesty and truth are needed in scientific and political discussions. These should not be limited to the issue of whether

or not a particular project is currently permitted by law. As Pope Francis warns, culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory part of contemporary reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and society. "In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God's transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding. We are free to apply our intelligence towards things that are evolving positively, or towards those adding new ills, new causes of suffering and real setbacks. This is what makes for the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom, growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction." (*Laudato Si'*, #79) That is why it is urgent to think of a participatory society as the way to foster a 'good society' beyond the failures of the political doctrine of multiculturalism that has produced cultural relativism and social fragmentation.

The challenges to the realization of a participatory society derive from many factors. They have educational, economic, cultural, and political roots. Those participating at the Plenary will first of all analyze the overwhelmingly unfavorable factors of many kinds, e.g. in the labour market, in the generational gap, in electoral systems, in welfare services, in the realm of ICTs, and then provide evidence of good practices that avoid them through the sharing economy, new forms of welfare organizations for young people (Neets) and the elderly, new policies for migrants, public-private partnerships, personalized services for disabled people and disrupted families. From the latter, new orientations will emerge for the introduction of national and international legislation. Ultimately, the Plenary aims to define the means by which production, consumption and allocation of social and cultural goods can systematically take place in the interest of the common good and in ways that are both sustainable and efficient. These new ways of regulating and organizing economic, cultural and political processes in terms of full social participation will be ones that nurture social participation.

Our reflections could develop according to the following rationale:

1. As a first step, our Plenary will elaborate on participation as a quest flowing from a comprehensive consideration of the human person interacting with others in society.
2. Further, we need to determine which structural economic, social and legal elements are obstacles to the free development of participation in societies.
3. Participatory factors and processes in political and economic life are already moving ahead in many contexts, generating good practices at the macro, meso and micro levels which give hope in the possibility of creating human-sized societies. These positive initiatives must be identified. For instance, certain practices of the sharing economy and Soziale Marktwirtschaft, bottom-up processes for a better social and cultural integration of disabled people, school dropouts, migrants, and new networks of Third Sector organizations, deserve our attention.
4. Finally, we should be able to enunciate the principles that should guide current social systems to become more participatory.