

# The Alternative

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Dear Reader

Since 2016 there has been an explosion of writing on the topic of democracy. Most of the writing is in defense of democracy which is thought to be under attack. A few books have argued that democracy does not work. Despite the prolific writing, the meaning of democracy itself very often remains unclear.

The founders of the United States, despite admiring and borrowing much from the classical age of Rome and Greece, wanted nothing to do with democracy. In fact, one of the fears that drove them to create the form of government which they called a republic was fear of democracy. They created a complicated system of checks and balances so that the mob rule which they associated with democracy would not be possible.

Democracy is a Greek word and the idea of democracy is usually credited to the Greeks. For the most part, however, the Greeks distrusted democracy. How did democracy come to triumph in the modern world, that is, rhetorically triumph as the assumed ideal for government? The attraction of democracy in the United States is that it proclaims the equality of every individual. That principle implies that each individual should have an equal say in decisions by a group.

The reason why democracy has never worked politically is a matter of simple arithmetic. Once a group goes beyond about a dozen people, it is physically and temporally impossible to have a voice and vote on most topics. Even if individuals were to spend all their time on politics, it would still not be enough to run a nation or even to conduct a tenement board meeting or a meeting of the PTA.

## DEMOCRACY, NO; DEMOCRATIC, YES

By Gabriel Moran

Democracy is unworkable as a system of government. It promises “equality,” which is a word from the world of mathematics, meaning, the same. We don’t need sameness except where numbers are the proper measure (for example, in equal pay for similar work). What we do need is respect for each person, and a setting in which each person can use his or her talents. Governments can respect people by creating livable spaces. Procedures for protecting the ability of people to have decent lives can be called democratic. The paradox here is that whereas democracy requires the minimum of rules and structures, a government with democratic protections requires a complex structure that some individuals will find burdensome.

A constitution should consist of half a dozen principles that could be and should be known by all its citizens. Hardly anyone in the United States reads the Constitution. It is an eighteenth-century document in language unintelligible to most people. The U.S. Constitution contains too much detail and a serious failure in its most basic principle of respect for every person. It also made it almost impossible to change provisions reflective of the time.

The most glaring failure of the Constitution is article 1, section 2, which says that the census would count “three-fifths of other persons.” It would have been less demeaning if slaves, like women and the natives, were not counted at all. But the deal was profitable for the states with large slave populations.

The rich white slaveholders constructed a government to be run by “disinterested gentlemen” like themselves, especially the Senate which would be composed of wise, old men elected by the states for preserving the power of the states. The president, the man who would execute the will of the legislature, was also to be chosen by electors from each state.

Past and present critics of the U.S. government tend to state their criticism in the name of “democracy.” By that is meant that the people should vote on a multitude of issues and that majority should rule. But majority votes by themselves do not improve things and the basic democratic principles should not be subject to popular vote.

The structure of checks and balances is what has to be changed for genuine reform. Many of the rules that are used in the government are unwritten customs that “gentlemen” should observe but they can be manipulated or

disregarded. The President, the Senate majority leader, and the Speaker of the House need job descriptions that set limits to their positions. Perhaps the most serious problem today is the corruption of the judiciary which is supposed to defend the basic principles of the country.

How could reform ever begin? It would require a coalition of office holders whose consciences will no longer allow them to participate in a pretense of protection for every citizen. They would have to risk their political careers and would likely lose the next election. But they could save their souls and maybe a country as well.

Should the Roman Catholic Church Be Democratic?

A favorite line of Catholic bishops is “Of course, the church is not a democracy.” They are right. When the church was 12 people around a dinner table, democracy was possible. But the quick spread of the church around the world meant that it could not be a democracy. However, it needed the structure for a democratic organization. The principle that every individual is deserving of respect was hardly foreign to the church. Medieval canonists developed “natural rights” that found their way into secular governments.

The amazing thing about the history of the church is that there were no treatises on church organization in its first thousand years. While office in the church was a spiritual “ministry” to others, organizations inevitably have a political side. But it was assumed that the Holy Spirit would guide church organization. Cardinal Bellarmine expressed the common view: “The church is a most perfect kingdom and an absolute monarchy which depends not on the people...but on the divine will alone.” That did not accord with the incarnational principle of the church. The divine is expressed through the human and the spiritual is manifest in the material world.

In the seventh century the adoption of the word “jurisdiction” indicated an imitation of Roman governors and it changed the nature of office to something that one owned and a source of revenue. The bishop of Rome was able to claim that he was not only the first among bishops but the source of the power of all bishops. The bishops became functionaries of the pope and managers of their district.

It was not until the fourteenth century that there were serious debates on where authority resides in the church. There was acceptance that the pope has the final say but suppose the pope was a heretic or otherwise unfit for office? The speculation suddenly became a live issue with a disputed

election of the pope in 1378. The church became split between factions in Avignon and Rome. The first attempt of a council to solve the problem succeeded only in creating a third claimant to be pope.

Finally, after almost forty years of the “Great Schism” an enormous gathering known as the Council of Constance dismissed all three claimants and appointed a legitimate pope, Martin V. By what authority did the Council act? They based their action on what is known as the conciliar theory which held that authority rests with the whole church. In the absence of a pope, the general council has the authority to represent the church. The Council of Constance tried to establish a constitution which the church badly needed. The Council’s first reform move was to assert that general councils should be convened at least every ten years, even if not called by the pope.

The conciliar theory shows up in many history books as an ad hoc solution to an immediate problem. But the theory has deep roots in the early history of the church. Furthermore, it did not disappear in the fourteenth century. Its advocates saw the need for a structure of checks and balances. Conciliarists continued to argue their cause until they were finally put down by the First Vatican Council. The pope was an absolute monarch. The conciliar theory was assumed to be a heresy of the past. But possibly it still has a future.

Pope John XXIII’s Second Vatican Council almost inadvertently revealed the need for the church to have open discussions about the nature of the church itself. The Council’s document on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, failed to cut through such distinctions as clergy-laity and it perpetuated the nineteenth century misunderstanding of “hierarchy,” but it was a start on reform. Like the reaction in the fifteenth century, the 1970s reasserted the pope as absolute, even though Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on birth control had undermined papal authority and split the church.

Not until Pope Francis began divesting himself of the trappings of a monarch did the possibility of a democratic constitution reemerge. He tried to re-invigorate episcopal synods but bishops talking to each other will never get very far. The episcopal mishandling of the clergy sex scandal is indicative of the need for the church to have systems of accountability.

The pope should long ago have called a general council that might be more ecumenical than previous councils. The Second Vatican Council did have “experts” who assisted each bishop, something which was a start in the right

direction. The Synod of 2014-2015 had the bishops on their own and the results showed why that was a bad idea. The Third Vatican Council should look more like the gathering in Constance in 1411. If the church were to use all its talent it could organize a cross-section of people from every walk of life to begin thinking about the organization of the church. It would be only a first step in a long journey which will require regular councils at different levels of the church.

## DEMOCRACY IS FOR THE GODS

By Costica Bradatan

History — the only true guide we have on this matter — has shown us that democracy is rare and fleeting. It flares up almost mysteriously in some fortunate place or another, and then fades out, it seems, just as mysteriously. Genuine democracy is difficult to achieve and once achieved, fragile. In the grand scheme of human events, it is the exception, not the rule.

Despite democracy's elusive nature, its core idea is disarmingly simple: As members of a community, we should have an equal say in how we conduct our life together. Paul Woodruff in his book, *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea*, writes "In democracy as it ought to be, all adults are free to chime in, to join the conversation on how they should arrange their life together. And no one is left free to enjoy the unchecked power that leads to arrogance and abuse." Have you ever heard of anything more reasonable? But who says we are reasonable?

Humans are not predisposed to living democratically. One can even make the point that democracy is "unnatural" because it goes against our vital instincts and impulses. What's most natural to us, just as to any living creature, is to seek to survive and reproduce. And for that purpose, we assert ourselves — relentlessly, unwittingly, savagely — against others: We push them aside, overstep them, overthrow them, even crush them if necessary. Behind the smiling facade of human civilization, there is at work the same blind drive toward self-assertion that we find in the animal realm.

Just scratch the surface of the human community and soon you will find the horde. It is the "unreasoning and unreasonable human nature," writes the zoologist Konrad Lorenz in his book "On Aggression," that pushes "two political parties or religions with amazingly similar programs of salvation to fight each other bitterly," just as it compels "an Alexander or a Napoleon to

sacrifice millions of lives in his attempt to unite the world under his scepter.” World history, for the most part, is the story of excessively self-assertive individuals in search of various scepters.

It doesn't help matters that, once such an individual has been enthroned, others are only too eager to submit to him. It is as though, in his illustrious presence, they realize they have too much freedom on their hands, which they find suddenly oppressive. In Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov," the Grand Inquisitor says: "There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, than to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible." And what a sweet surrender! Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler and Mussolini were all smooth talkers and great political seducers.

Their relationship with the crowd was particularly intimate. For in regimes of this kind, whenever power is used and displayed, the effect is profoundly erotic. What we see, for instance, in "The Triumph of the Will" (thanks, in good measure, to Leni Riefenstahl's perverse genius), is people experiencing a sort of collective ecstasy. The seducer's pronouncements may be empty, even nonsensical, but that matters little; each one brings the aroused crowd to new heights of pleasure. He can do whatever he likes with the enraptured followers now. They will submit to any of their master's fancies.

This is, roughly, the human context against which the democratic idea emerges. No wonder that it is a losing battle. Genuine democracy doesn't make grand promises, does not seduce or charm, but only aspires to a certain measure of human dignity. It is not erotic. Compared to what happens in populist regimes, it is a frigid affair. Who in his right mind would choose the dull responsibilities of democracy over the instant gratification a demagogue will provide? And yet, despite all this, the democratic idea has come close to embodiment a few times in history — moments of grace when humanity almost managed to surprise itself.

One element that is needed for democracy to emerge is a sense of humility. A humility at once collective and internalized, penetrating, even visionary, yet true. The kind of humility that is comfortable in its own skin, one that, because it knows its worth and its limits, can even laugh at itself. A humility that, having seen many a crazy thing and learned to tolerate them, has become wise and patient. To be a true democrat, in other words, is to understand that when it comes to the business of living together, you are no better than the others, and to act accordingly.

After Athens' radical experiment in equality, democracy has resurfaced elsewhere, but often in forms that the ancient Athenians would probably have trouble calling democratic. For instance, much of today's American democracy (one of the best versions on the market right now) would by Athenian standards be judged "oligarchic." It's the fortunate wealthy few who typically decide here not only the rules of the political game, but also who wins and who loses. Ironically, the system favors what we desperately wanted to avoid when we opted for democracy in the first place: the power-hungry, oppressively self-assertive political animal.

Yet we should not be surprised. "If there were a people of gods, it would govern itself democratically," Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote. "So perfect a form of government is not for men." Democracy is so hard to find in the human world that most of the time when we speak of it, we refer to a remote ideal rather than a fact. That's what democracy is ultimately about: an ideal that people attempt to put into practice from time to time. Never adequately and never for long — always clumsily, timidly, as though for a trial period.

Yet democracy is one of those elusive things — happiness is another — whose promise, even if perpetually deferred, is more important than its actual existence. We may never get it, but we cannot afford to stop dreaming of it.

## TOWARD A DEMOCRATIC CHURCH (1992)

By Eugene Bianchi

Underlying the rationale for democratic structures in the Catholic Church are arguments from both the past and from the present. The argument from tradition can be succinctly stated in the scholastic dictum "if it happened before, it can happen again. The "laity" in the early church participated in the election of their leaders. They also had a right of recall. But even beyond these functions, the "laity" was actively engaged in conciliar events, that is, in vital decision making that affected the church on local, regional and even international levels. They actively engaged in ecumenical councils from Carthage in the fourth century to Trent in the sixteenth century.

The argument from the present for a democratic Catholic Church should not be misconstrued as a capitulation to the contemporary secular mentality. There is, of course, much to criticize in modernity's individualism, consumerism and lack of ecological awareness. But the church that points

out the evil ways of the world must be ever striving to live out within itself models of a better society. In important areas of pluralism and dissent, the Catholic Church today trails behind many democratic secular institutions.

The ecclesiastical structures of monarchy, and at times of totalitarian conduct, are not mandated by the gospel. They defy the freedom in God preached in the New Testament. To reestablish the structures that would honor the old *consensus fidelium*, the experience of the whole believing people, the church needs to take to heart its own admonition at Vatican II that it is both a teaching and a learning church.

The church must extend the Vatican II doctrine of collegiality (and the principle of social encyclicals, subsidiarity) into its own internal democratic reorganization. Reform in the Catholic Church toward a democratic polity is the basis for other desired changes. Whatever the specific issues, be they married clergy, women priests, or birth control and divorce, the underlying issues blocking creative rethinking is restrictive monarchical structures. Such a polity leads to rule by the judgment of a king, who in the end does not have to listen to the experience and wisdom of the people. Channels of open communication, deliberation, and decision making still do not exist sufficiently in the Catholic Church.

A Catholic Church confident of its democratic possibilities needs to recapture the spirit of Pope John XXIII who, ten days before his death, urged the church to read the signs of the time with hope rather than despair:

“Today more than ever, certainly more than in previous centuries, we are called to serve all humanity, and not merely Catholics; to defend above all and everywhere the rights of the human person, and not merely those of the Catholic Church. Present day conditions, the demands of the last fifty years have led us to new realities. It is not that the gospel has changed; it is we have begun to understand it better. Anyone who has had a long life was faced with new tasks in the social order. Anyone who was, as I was, twenty years in the East, eight years in France, and been able to confront different cultures and traditions, knows that the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and the look far ahead.”

In this testament of John XXIII, we see both respect for creative interpretation of tradition and profound willingness to walk into a democratic future.