

# A Spirituality of Democracy

Written For the *Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church's*  
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The word "democracy" makes us think of a type of government in which the people have significant involvement in the ruling process through elected representation, constitutional law, and similar modes of participation in governance. We also think of democracy as largely a western historical phenomenon, with roots in ancient Greece, emerging to its full flowering in the Enlightenment era. Before Pius XII's blessing of democracy in 1943, the Catholic Church tended to align itself with older monarchical and aristocratic forms of government in a two hundred year struggle against the democratizing trend in the west.

Nineteenth century events like the *Syllabus of Errors*, the defining of papal primacy and infallibility at Vatican I, and Leo XIII's strictures against "Americanism" stand as milestones in the church's largely negative attitude toward liberal thought and democracy. Even after Vatican II, with its many democratizing moves, it is common to hear the cry: "the church is not a democracy." Since people usually see democracy as a secular, political style of government, they resist applying it to the church whose present monarchical structure appears to be mandated by God, or at least by centuries of tradition. In brief, democracy is understood as an alien import into the church rather than a vital dimension of Christian spirituality.

I would like to make a case not for a politics of democracy in the church, but rather for a spirituality of democracy out of which democratizing structures would necessarily flow. It is important to get beyond the usual resistances to the idea of democracy in the church such as doctrine can't be decided democratically, political parties would breed dissension in the church and similar critiques. These objections, while answerable on other grounds, are based on the simplistic idea of imposing something foreign (political democracy) on an institution whose religious core is anti-democratic or a-democratic.

In shaping touchstones for a spirituality of democracy, I will refer to themes from the church's own religious tradition in an ecumenical way. Ecumenism today means not only dialoguing with other branches of Christianity, but also seeking congruent spiritual wisdom from a wider range of traditions. I will develop aspects of a spirituality of democracy under the rubric of the eight basic principles undergirding "A Proposed Constitution of the Catholic Church" formulated by the *Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church* (ARCC, 3150 Newgate Drive, Florissant, MO 63033; Tel: 215-477-1080; E-mail: arcc@arccsites.org; Web: <http://arccsites.org> ).

Before we start, it would be good to address a general understanding of spirituality. The term has had many meanings in history and is used loosely and variously today. A working definition of spirituality would be those elements in personal and corporate life that provide deeper meaning and experience. In this sense, spirituality resembles an older query about one's philosophy of life; but here it would also contain a corporate dimension for those standing in a Christian tradition. I use the

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word “deeper,” as in deeper meaning and experience, to refer to the things that really count as motivating forces in individual and communal life. Spirituality in this sense has to do with how we lean into life, not only in our active motivations but also in our porousness or receptivity. Spirituality, therefore, is not a static concept; it is always emerging, changing, adapting, embracing, relinquishing. It has to do with how we are being grasped by reality when we are at our best or our worst. “Meaning” implies how we continually try to make sense of our world; and “experience” expresses spirituality’s holistic dimension. It is more than conceptual meaning-making; it involves our emotions and our bodily reality. In a more religious vein, spirituality, as the word connotes, is about the dynamic presence of Spirit in our spirits and in the universe.

## 1. The Principle of Dialogue

Dialogue is the overarching or foundational aspect of the six other principles of a democratic spirituality. For dialogue involves facing the other in his or her differences with a spirit of empathy. It means crossing over into the mind and feelings of one’s dialogue partner, as an individual or a group, that is, inhabiting and experiencing the world of the other. In this process we return home, as it were, with an expanded vision and new knowledge about the other. The dialogue process can gradually transform the participants inwardly, bringing about new ways of seeing problems and challenges that in a pre-dialogic state seemed impossible to resolve. Dialogue can also move participants from narrowly conceived visions to more global perspectives.

Dialogue is a key element in each of the other six aspects of democratic spirituality. Subsidiarity is a dialogue among diverse levels of the spiritual community. Decentralization allows a more intense dialogue to go on at local and regional levels. The election of officials is a form of dialogue between the community and its leaders. Terms of office imply a dialogue across “both sides of the desk” for the present leaders will soon be on the other side of office holding. The separation of powers calls for a dialogue among several powers: executive, legislative and judicial. Finally, the principle of accountability demands that leaders be in dialogue with those they represent about stewardship in office.

In democratic environments, formulations and applications of tradition are arrived at through a process of respectful dialogue. “Respectful dialogue” sounds very sanitized and lofty when we think about the real situations of democratic politics where intense partisanship plays a constant role. Yet the ideal of respectful dialogue remains as a foundational source for democratic outcomes; even those who abuse it in practice recognize it as essential to long-term democratic success. Over against authoritative edict, dialogue rests on a different understanding of how best to arrive at communal decisions. In non-democratic governance, others may be consulted and often are, but such systems maintain the intrinsic superiority of the ruler over the ruled.

A good ecclesial example would be the 1968 papal edict on the evil of birth control. Dialogue in the papal commission had urged change in the church’s position, but the pope, understood as intrinsically wiser or more valuable as judge of things, decided otherwise. Dialogue in this event was merely consultative, not truly deliberative. But an authentic process of dialogue implies that all parties involved have intrinsic value and have a right to exchange views and enter into the application of tradition to present needs. In church language, such a process calls for privileging the *sensus fidelium*, the lived experience of the faithful.

What does the principle of dialogue have to do with spirituality? Dialogue foregrounds and enhances the worth of humans and of nature itself in the everyday world of decision-making. It lifts up our subjectivity, that is, our roles as agents, over against being passive recipients of orders from those above us. If spirituality concerns the enhancement of deeper meaning and experience in human life, dialogue, both inward and outward, is the lingua franca of this enhancement. Inwardly, dialogue becomes a type of prayer or meditation, a rhythm of listening to and communing with the interior spirit. Through the polarity of listening and communing, we tap into our mystic potential; in the process we become aware of our ability to experience an inter-relatedness with others and with nature. Through such inner dialogue, we gradually move beyond our fears of isolation/alienation, our constant attempts to preserve our fragile egos against the threats of life. We have a chance of learning how to live and die in peace.

In Buddhist terms, such going inward means the gradual dissolution of the false, solid and separate self, and the awakening of our inter-connected and compassionate being. In Christianity, this inward dialogic process is sometimes referred to as an experience of the dark night or of the cross on the path to experiences of new birth or resurrection where the fearful ego lets go in union with the divine in the world. The Taoist master sums up this inward dialogic process:

Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source ...If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes, you are ready.

*(Tao Te Ching, chapter 16, Stephen Mitchell version; Harper Perennial, 1988)*

The spiritual life is a process of inward dialogue by which we move from threatened isolation to experience of union, from lacking worth to being “dignified as a king.”

The dialogue of spirituality is also outward with strong democratizing overtones. Religious movements, both in their origins and in their self-reforming efforts, question authoritative structures that have become fixed in rigid hierarchical modes. Jesus moves against religious and even secular establishments that have become oppressive to ordinary people. He respects tradition, but he questions authority, calling his hearers back to the realization of their inner kingdom, their own self-and-divine worth ‘...if the lilies of the field are excellent in God's eyes, how much more you....’ He wants his followers not to lord it over one another, but to live in a fellowship of equals.

The Quakers are an interesting example of reform in Christian history that highlights democratic status and dialogue. In his powerful reaction against the Anglican union of altar and throne, George Fox summoned his Society of Friends not only to attend to the “inner light” but to shape their religious movement in dialogic and egalitarian styles. The Buddha, while preserving many aspects of ancient Indian spirituality, makes a powerful break with Brahmin hierarchies in religious and cultural life. The possibility of enlightenment becomes the domain of everyone; it ceases to be ruled by caste and condition of birth. The Buddha when near death urges his disciples not to fear his leaving them as if he were the superior and unique carrier of the dharma. That spiritual path, he tells them, is already among them and within them. Buddhist spirituality goes forward by an inward and outward dialogue in community, in the sangha.

## 2. The Principle of Subsidiarity.

The Constitution (I will shorten references to ARCC's *Proposed Constitution* in this way) understands subsidiarity as: all decision-making rights and responsibilities shall remain with the smaller community unless the good of the broader community specifically demands that it exercise those rights and responsibilities.

The principle of subsidiarity helps us to reflect on two aspects of spirituality, summed up in the words "within" and "below." Both of these words connect with the spirituality of Jesus. When subsidiarity tells us to look within the local community for decision-making, it is analogous to the central preaching of Jesus that the kingdom or domain of God is within us. Our worth comes not from outside authority mainly but from our intrinsic value. Our body-persons, according to an early and long tradition in Christianity, are temples of the Holy Spirit. It may take us some time individually to come to this realization in a way that counts for us. But the Jesus tradition is clear about the presence of God within the world and within each creature.

Taoism is another wisdom tradition that emphasizes the presence of the Tao in all of its manifestations, although it is not identified with or exhausted by any of them. Modern discovery of Gnostic gospels, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, shows how deeply the interiorizing of religion was in early Christianity. One might object that I have been speaking of the "within" of individuals whereas subsidiarity refers to the "within" of local communities. Yet Christianity also stresses the presence of the divine within communities. "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them." A major thrust of liturgical renewal after Vatican II underscores God's presence in the whole worshipping community.

A second aspect of subsidiarity as a democratic principle relates to a spirituality arising from below rather than one originating from above in the sense of coming from established authorities who, as it were, promulgate and control spiritual systems of lesser initiates. The latter approach is more akin to monarchical-aristocratic procedures. The earlier strata of the New Testament, that is, those levels of the documents showing a pre-episcopal, pre-established church-institution, manifest teachings of Jesus in his sayings and anecdotes that favor a religion from below. Jesus appeals to the marginalized, the outsiders in Palestine; he is critical of various aspects of established Judaism in his time. He says that one has to become as a little child to recognize his teaching. This seems to be similar to the Buddhist notion of the need to place oneself in the seemingly lower posture of having "beginner's mind" in order to open oneself to the path of enlightenment. Again, this attitude resembles the repeated statements of the master in the *Tao Te Ching* that her task is to teach "unknowing" to those who are too attached to their concepts about spirituality.

This spirituality from below does not negate the role of the teacher who for a time remains "above," that is, more knowledgeable than those further back on the path. The place of authentic teacher is vital in all wisdom traditions. The Bodhisattva vows to turn from the singular enjoyment of his enlightened state to teach others ways of dealing with their suffering. Sometimes this teaching role takes on corporate dimensions in councils and synods and other forms of communal pronouncement. Yet the role of the teacher in these traditions is to make herself unneeded as learners gradually become their own gurus. Of course, there is always a place for consultation with peers on the spiritual path and for listening to corporate guidelines that may contain accumulated wisdom of ages.

But democratic spirituality resists rigid impositions of teachings from above linked to sanctions and retribution. Jesus' friends glean grain on the sabbath; the sabbath as religio-cultural event is for the sake of humans not for the sake of immutable decrees from authority. Actually in these stories of humanizing the sabbath, Jesus was acting in a well-established rabbinical mode. Those in positions of authority are not to impose burdens on widows, orphans and other less powerful people. This stream of Christian thinking takes different forms in various periods of history. It can be found, for example, in the movements of lay spirituality in the Middle Ages as well as in today's liberation theologies. The latter expressly talk about finding God in experiences of people from below, of preferential options for the poor.

Pope John Paul II articulated the Principle of Subsidiarity when he wrote:

Smaller social units—whether nations themselves, communities, ethnic or religious groups, families or individuals—must not be namelessly absorbed into a greater conglomeration, thus losing their identity and having their prerogatives usurped. Rather, the proper autonomy of each social class and organization, each in its own sphere, must be defended and upheld. This is nothing other than the principle of subsidiarity, which requires that a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its rightful functions; instead the higher order should support the lower order and help it to coordinate its activity with that of the rest of society, always with a view to serving the common good (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991). Public opinion needs to be educated in the importance of the principle of subsidiarity for the survival of a truly democratic society. (John Paul II to Sixth Session, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Feb. 23, 2000).

### 3. The Principle of Decentralization .

This democratic principle is very close to that of subsidiarity. It says that each community shall form its own body of governing regulations. In one way, it repeats the notion of subsidiarity in stressing the role of smaller communities taking responsibility for their own governance rather than being controlled by one overarching center. But the aspect of decentralization that we haven't discussed in its democratic perspective is that of respect for diversity. Throughout the world today we see examples of violence and social breakdown because of a fundamental lack of respect for diversity in religion, politics, ethnic orientation and cultural background.

Often enough this dearth of acceptance of diversity occurs in countries where democratic ways of life have not been developed. Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Rwanda, the Sudan are cases in point. Even in nations with democratic structures, such as Northern Ireland, respect for diversity joined with decentralized rule is hard to achieve. Frequently enough in history institutional religion has aggravated the problem of accepting differences. Our fear-driven penchant to dominate and control others causes us to impose right doctrine and behavior regardless of personal and communal differences. Implicit in the notion of decentralization is the concept of diverse and multiple centers; in these common situations, particularity must be respected and diversity honored.

From the standpoint of spirituality, diverse teachings, organizations and actions are intrinsic to authentic religion. A key reason for this is the multi-faceted and varied mystery of divine presence in the world. To claim the perfect knowledge of this mystery is a supreme hubris, and to impose such teaching and related conduct defies the gift of faith. Moreover, forms of coercive religious centralization deny the limits of human intelligence and moral goodness. The First Amendment to the American Constitution regarding non-establishment and free exercise of religion is a political statement of a theological truth: respect for the diversity of religion is based on the limits of human intelligence, a history of religious oppressions, the nature of faith itself and the ultimate incomprehensibility of divine mystery.

Honoring spiritual diversity becomes an ever greater necessity in our age of advanced technology and cybernetics where people encounter the diverse other more frequently. We can profit in personal spirituality by learning from different wisdom traditions. In recent decades eastern modes of spirituality have come into dialogue with western contemplative traditions. This phenomenon has elicited a renewed interest in western mysticism; the encounter of similar yet diverse traditions stimulates creative possibilities.

Yet some conservative religious groups view the development of religious pluralism as a threat to the integrity of their particular heritages. For example, the controversies in Catholicism between theologians who foster “inculturation” of Christianity in Asia and Vatican critics of such moves exemplify these tensions. Yet the encounter with diversity of spiritual traditions can be an occasion for reinterpreting theology and for clarifying the basics of one’s own heritage. The impact of diversity causes individuals and religious groups to face change and impermanence, an experience which can be disturbing in an area where humans seek certainty and security.

#### 4. The Principle of Participation through Elections

The Constitution underscores a key element in democratic governance, the election of officials. Elective processes, giving voice to all constituents, are important ways of enhancing personal participation in democracies. In the secular realm, fairly conducted elections allow contending political groups to advance their programs through the open forum of debate. Elections also permit peaceful change within a society, and they give individuals a sense of worth by emphasizing the deliberative value of each person’s vote. Church history shows that the elective process for choosing leaders was much more common among Christians in an earlier era; moreover, some religious orders and cathedral chapters continued this elective tradition. The choosing of a new pope is accomplished by election in the College of Cardinals.

Yet this elective tradition in Christianity has been largely submerged in the Catholic Church. From the medieval period, as the church attained ever greater power in Europe, it imitated feudal and monarchical forms of governance which maximized the power of the ruler and lessened participation of the people in elections. Popes and bishops became lords whose authority derived from on high, not from the will of their constituents. Theological theories were developed to show how a divine right of kings pertained to church officials. Much of this turn away from democratic participation is implicitly reflected in the often repeated statement: the church is not a democracy. Those who oppose the election of officials in the church allege the dangers of partisan politics entering into the church. Those who advocate ecclesial elections point out that such partisan politics

already exist in the monarchical form of church governance, where politicking is done in ways less open to public scrutiny.

On the question of elections, what seems on the surface to be a merely political endeavor relates to two aspects of spirituality found in different wisdom traditions. These elements of spirituality are participation and inclusiveness. From a Christian perspective, all are called to participate in God's sanctifying grace. All are children of God who participate in the one creation. More recent expressions of creation spirituality underscore our interconnectedness, and therefore, participation in a singular, evolving world. Our participation goes back to our animal ancestry and to earlier eons.

In the New Testament, Jesus awakens his hearers to their participation in God's domain or within the immediacy of their existence. In his work of calling to spiritual participation, Jesus breaks barriers of exclusiveness. He fosters an open table where sinners sit with the seemingly righteous. He heals those outside the narrower confines of religious identity; he talks about a worship in spirit and truth in a place that will welcome the participation of Samaritan and Jew. The religion of Jesus has no place for higher modes of participation for special initiates or for those in positions of governance or even for those who in later centuries will form hermit and monastic communities. All are invited to participate in the festival, even those outside of power circles. Jesus alerts followers to pay special attention to the marginalized, the poor of Yahweh, in preparing the feast.

A similar development takes place in Buddhism with the rise of the Mahayana tradition. This movement emphasizes buddha-nature in which all can participate, not just the monks. It lifts up lay participation on the path to enlightenment. That redoubtable Pope St. Leo the Great (d. 461 C.E.), who faced down Attila the Hun and saved Rome from the sack, wrote: "Let him who will stand before all be elected by all" (*Epistle*, x, 4; *PL*, 54, 634).

## 5. The Principle of Term Limits

In the political sphere, the issue of term limits has been much discussed lately in the United States. Those who oppose term limits point to the values of maintaining experienced people in office without limiting their claim to elective office, save that of standing periodically for re-election. The proponents of term limits counter these arguments by insisting that limits on office holding better serve the common good. They hold that such limits allow new energies and ideas to rise in the political process, and limits forestall the perpetuation of incompetence and power-mongering.

The spiritual ramifications of term limits bear on both the individual and the community. Religious traditions encourage individuals to get in touch with their "will to power," to be ready to let go of ego glorification. Such spiritual discipline works on two levels: it serves to help an individual along the road of inner transformation by not letting him or her get sidetracked into ego desires that pull one away from the *unum necessarium*: the experience of union or connection with a wider reality. On a second level, this curbing of self-centered ego desires in spiritual traditions attempts to turn us toward humble service of community.

The church has made some strides in recognizing the need to restrain power trips among its leaders and to provide adequate governance for the faithful. In the wake of Vatican II, bishops were

to resign at seventy-five. While a move in the right direction, this minimal rule is still far from adequate to provide for creative and energetic leadership, and to guard against the prospect of an official's mental and physical incompetence negatively affecting the ecclesial community. The faster pace of the modern world in so many realms from transportation to cybernetics calls for leaders who are up to such a challenge.

Religious orders with their frequent changing of local and provincial superiors have long recognized the importance of term limits as part of spiritual discipline and pastoral efficiency. It makes little sense today for general superiors and popes to stay in office for life. The case of John Paul II is a clear example of the problem. Here is a leader with a major debilitating illness who thinks that God is calling him to lead the church into the new millennium. How much of this is from spiritual inspiration? How much of this clinging to office is from other motivations? From a spiritual point of view, would not the witness of a pope stepping down accord better with the attitude of Jesus who urged his followers not to act as lords and masters?

Eastern religious traditions, while not dealing directly with term limits, are virtually unanimous in calling adherents to question the direction of their desires. The *Tao Te Ching* portrays the master as one who leads not by dominance and coercion in the manner of the world, but who leads in a humble and self-effacing way:

When the Master governs, the people are hardly aware that he exists.... If you don't trust the people, you make them untrustworthy.... When his (the master's) work is done, the people say: 'Amazing, we did it all by ourselves!' (Chapter 17)

The point of all this is to see how a topic as seemingly far removed from spirituality as term limits actually can carry significant spiritual meaning.

## 6. Principle of Separate Powers

The new Constitution calls for a separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, along with a system of checks and balances. Developed modern democracies base themselves on this principle to protect against any oppressive accumulation of power in the hands of one branch of government. It is an expression of Lord Acton's maxim: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The centuries of absolute monarchies in the west produced overwhelming evidence of the potential for abuse in concentrated power at grave costs to human rights. Although the church had various means of recourse to resolve conflicts, even in its most centralized periods, it tended to remain in an absolutist mold long after such governance was abandoned in much of Europe.

Two factors may have contributed to this long identification of the Catholic Church with highly centralized control. One was the close identification of ecclesial government with the autocratic regimes that flourished in Catholic countries from the middle ages to the nineteenth century. A second reason pertains to the nature of this church as a religious institution. This is the tendency to sacralize institutions that are the outcome of historical conditioning. When the pope is seen as the vicar of Christ or when bishops are described as princes of the church, a kind of unchangeable theological mantle falls over their offices. Catholics are then taught that a centralized,

even absolutist form of government is God's will. Talk of separation of powers and democratic constitutions appears to many as theologically untenable.

The counter argument rests on the premise that church forms of governance are mainly reformable human and cultural developments. This reform position opens up to issues of spirituality. It takes seriously an old Christian doctrine about sin and the human proclivity toward destructiveness in certain situations. Part of this inclination toward evil clusters around the abuse of power to aggrandize the ego and dominate others for personal or group gain. From this perspective, the separation of powers with its checks and balances acts as a communal corrective to mitigate such abuses. It is a hedge against our negative proclivities or in terms of the Lord's Prayer, a way of not being led into temptation.

From a positive point of view, checks and balances submit us to a spiritual discipline that can lead to the empowerment of many over against control by a few. Such a diverse system entails elected councils and leaders, as well as established judicial systems at all levels. It attests to and activates diverse gifts inherent in people. Through participation that is more than nominal on all stages of the three separated powers, individuals gain a sense of empowerment and self-worth. They realize that their involvements contribute to the welfare of all. Empowering people to realize their gifts is a goal of spiritual wisdom traditions. Christian creation theology would discuss this empowerment as persons experiencing their co-creative potential with the Creator. Buddhists might speak of empowerment as realizing one's own buddha-nature. The *Tao Te Ching* talks about returning self-governance to the people:

If you want to learn how to govern, avoid being clever (filled with rigid concepts) or rich, The simplest pattern is the clearest. Content with an ordinary life, you can show all the people the way back to their own true nature. (Chapter 65)

## 7. Principle of Accountability

This principle states that all leaders and councils will regularly provide their constituents an account of their work, including financial accounts, to be reviewed by an outside auditor when appropriate. The principle continues the effort of the previous point on separation of powers to avoid abuses, especially in financial matters. When power is concentrated in one person or group, financial transactions tend to be secretive; only insiders are privy to the use of money. In recent decades, great scandals, such as Banco Ambrosiano affair, have befallen the Vatican over the misallocation and mismanagement of funds. For the most part, dioceses, parishes and religious orders are not accountable to the people regarding financial resources and their uses.

Accountability is a form of responsible belonging as a spiritual discipline. Scriptures speak of Christians as members of one body, an organic whole with many functions. One part of the body must respond honestly and with integrity to other parts of the body for the health of the whole. Such communal understandings have been intrinsic to the Christian movement from its earliest days (Acts of the Apostles, 2: 42-47 & 5: 1-11) to the present (base and small faith communities). While the transformation of the individual is important to Christianity, it is accomplished in and through community, through responsible belonging.

A key aspect of Buddhist spirituality also stresses the importance of living responsibly in community. Whoever “enters the stream” toward enlightenment, takes refuge not only in the *Buddha* and the *dharma*, but also in the *sangha*, that is, the community of seekers. Essential teachings on the eightfold path (“The Four Noble Truths”) emphasize moral living in community. Such ways of responsible belonging are spiritual disciplines without which the other dimensions of the eightfold path (meditation and wisdom) would be perverted.

## 8. Principle of Representation

This principle of the Constitution states that all groupings of the faithful, including women and minorities, shall be equitably represented in all positions of leadership and decision making. Such a foundational element challenges the long history of patriarchy and eurocentrism in the church. It is not meant as a condemnation of past ages, but rather as a call to respond to the signs of the times.

The church has spoken out in recent decades on respecting the rights of minority groups in various parts of the world, and, in limited ways, Catholic documents uphold the rights and dignity of women. Pope John Paul II himself has proclaimed: “It is important to remember that the ‘health’ of a political community can be gauged in no small way by the free and responsible participation of all citizens in public affairs. In fact, such participation is a “necessary condition and sure guarantee of the development of the whole individual and of all people” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Dec. 30, 1987).

But the harder task seems to be the orchestration of these rights for women and minorities within the church. More progress has been made in church circles on bringing racial and ethnic minorities into leadership positions. Women, on the other hand, are kept out of the priesthood and the episcopate by Vatican arguments about the doctrinal impossibility of allowing females into this leadership arena. Pope John Paul II issued a declaration barring women from the priesthood on the grounds that such a possibility was incompatible with tradition and with the Vatican’s interpretation of the consequences of Jesus’ maleness.

Homosexuals represent another minority with uneasy status within Catholicism. Since gays have been well represented in the priesthood, they have most likely participated in higher levels of Catholic governance. But their ambivalent position in church doctrine (homosexual orientation is seen as intrinsically disordered while homosexuals are pastorally welcomed to the church) has generally forced gays to conceal their homosexuality, especially in clerical circles.

The spiritual dimensions of the principle of equitable representation at all levels of leadership stem from basic gospel values concerning inclusiveness in Christianity. Paul’s perspective in Galatians sums up this attitude: in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female....(one might add by extension: neither gay nor straight). Yet disputes over other sections of the scriptures cloud this inclusivity, especially for homosexuals. These incongruities are good examples of the reality that religions are always works in progress. Religious movements begin with strong value foci, such as inclusivity in Christianity, but they also struggle with socio-cultural perspectives that limit inclusiveness. In Whitehead’s terms, religions are always in the making, however stable they may seem at any given period.

Yet this very inconsistency or unfinishedness of religious movements connotes a potential for spiritual development among their adherents. The fallacy of certainty, of absolute possession of the truth, is an obstacle to spiritual development. In his own ironic and self-aggrandizing way, Paul warns against the wisdom of this world and opts for the folly of the cross; against what seems to be secure knowledge, he presents a “folly,” precisely that which overturns seeming certainties. Jesus’ parables and aphorisms are filled with the element of dislocation, that is, statements that upset what seems to be the order of truth: let the dead bury the dead....I have come divide parent from child, etc.

These pronouncements amount to Christian koans, paradoxes that throw the spiritual aspirant off the comfortable trail of security and certainty in face of the incomprehensible mystery of God. The *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly insists on the importance of “not knowing,” of not exaggerating the value of our concepts on the spiritual journey: “The ancient Masters didn’t try to educate the people, but kindly taught them to not-know. When they think that they know the answers, people are difficult to guide. When they know that they don’t know, people can find their own way.” (Chapter 65)

A more direct spiritual lesson from the Constitution’s principle of representation arises from the very quest for greater inclusivity. We have noted above that a basic aspect of major spiritualities is the movement within persons and between them toward greater connection or union. Christian scriptures echo this inclination to oneness in many places: in the Father’s house, there are many mansions; that they may be one even as Jesus and the Father are one; that barriers between people may be broken down to reconcile adversaries. Unfortunately, Christians in history have frequently manifested this impetus to inclusivity more in the breach than in the observance. But the call to fuller interconnectedness and representation remains a key ideal of the Christian movement.

The overall point of this whole discussion has been the linking of spirituality to *democracy*. Democratic governance does not claim to be a spiritual movement, and in many ways it is not. But from other perspectives, democratic governance seems to be very compatible with spiritual development. It is important to realize this congruity in presenting a democratic Constitution for the Roman Catholic Church. Let us, then, close with the words of two recent popes:

Democracy...represents a most important topic for the new millennium...[the Church] values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of ***electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them*** (John Paul II to Sixth Session, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Feb. 23, 2000).

“It belongs to the laity, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative...infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live.” Let each one examine himself, to see what he has done up to now, and what he ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action.” (Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, 1971).