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## National Minorities: A Chance or Challenge for the Catholic Church<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract.*

The issue of national minorities in the past century has often given rise to conflicts, becoming a peace-threatening issue and consequently a source of serious distress. Thus, from this perspective, it had become a topic that the churches could not remain silent about.

This article aims to present briefly the way in which the Catholic Church related to the national minorities from the perspective of the Catholic social teaching. At first, we will present a few ecclesiastical documents (papal documents, writings, speeches, etc.) that touched upon this topic one way or another during the past more than 100 years. In the light of these, we shall see the main aspects that the Catholic Church deemed to be important to emphasize in relation to minorities. Next, as an example, we shall also mention a few local ecclesiastical documents pointing out the manner in which the general principles are manifest in the toilsome everyday life of the local communities experiencing concrete historical situations. The third part of the study will refer to the important basic principles of social teaching – namely, common good and subsidiarity –, and we will try to pin down certain insights that would guide both the majority and the minority on the path towards the opportunity of welfare, thereby bringing hope for the mitigation of tensions.

*Keywords:* national minorities, social teaching, the Catholic Church, common good, subsidiarity.

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## *Introduction*

In the past century, the issue of national minorities<sup>3</sup> has often given rise to conflicts not only in our narrower environment but also around the European stage, becoming a peace-threatening issue and consequently a source of serious distress. Also due to this sad experience,<sup>4</sup> the issue should become one of the major topics in Catholic moral theology that has always been concerned with tackling the individual-related issues, mostly construing them in the light of faith and seeking therewith the adequate answers to the questions arising.

But it has not been always so in relation to this issue due to several aspects: among others, we must see that the church plays a dual role regarding the national minorities, and this quite often affects the church's practical and theoretical approach to this topic:<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, the Catholic Church as a *diplomatic factor* participates in all practices characterizing the social and political life of our times, while, on the other hand, it is the *pleader* for the rights of national minorities when it speaks up against injustices and abuse. At the same time, we must note that due to the social structures the church itself may be concerned in many ways since there are not only situations in which the national minority is made up of Catholics inside a majority of another religion, but there can be cases in which the minority as well as the majority are all members of the same church or even where the Catholics make up the majority denomination. And although the Church, by virtue of its mission, should strive to approach social issues as well as the issues of the

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<sup>3</sup> We must point out straight away that the concept of national minority is problematic, and we do not wish to clarify it at this point. Readers interested in the topic can gain an insight on its complexity in the following works: RÖPPER, Matthias (1993): *Das Problem der Definition des Begriffes Minderheit, in Minderheiten und Nationale Frage: Die Entwicklung in Mittel- und Südeuropa im Lichte der Katholischen Soziallehre* (Hrsg. von Ingeborg Gabriel). Wien, Verlag Verband der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften. 81–88; GIRASOLI, Nicola (1995): *A nemzeti kisebbségek fogalmáról*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó.

<sup>4</sup> There may also be other motivating points of view such as the large number of the concerned.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BLUMENWITZ, Dieter (2000): *Positionen der katholischen Kirche zum Schutz von Minderheiten und Volksgruppen in einer internationalen Friedensordnung: eine völkerrechtliche Untersuchung*. Forschungsergebnisse der Studiengruppe für Politik und Völkerrecht – Kulturstiftung der Deutschen Vertriebenen 32. Köln, Wissenschaft und Politik. 18.

national minorities from a theological perspective, we have experienced very different approaches during the times precisely due to the aforementioned complex social context.<sup>6</sup>

Going beyond these “disturbing factors”, next we intend to sketch briefly the manner in which the church’s attitude towards national minorities has been shaped from the perspective of the Catholic social teaching. At first, we would like to mention some official ecclesiastical documents (papal documents, writings, speeches, etc.) that one way or another touched upon this topic during the past more than 100 years. In the light of these, we shall see the main aspects that the Catholic Church deemed important to emphasize in relation to minorities. Next, as an example, we shall also mention a few local ecclesiastical documents pointing out the manner in which the general principles are manifest in the toilsome everyday life of the local communities experiencing concrete historical situations. The third part of the study will refer to the important basic principles of social teaching – namely, common good and subsidiarity –, and we will try to pin down certain insights that would guide both the majority and the minority on the path towards the opportunity of welfare, thereby bringing hope for the mitigation of tensions.

### *1. The Presence of National Minorities in the Papal Documents*

The issue of national minorities is basically a recent concern since we can practically talk about it as an acute social problem from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the nation-states arose. And, accordingly, it is worth looking for remarks and statements on it dating back to this very period.

Next, still at the level of theoretical teaching, we would like to give an account about a few documents that are highly relevant in this topic and which broadly reveal the Catholic Church’s standpoint in the matter of national minorities.

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<sup>6</sup> Due to its complexity, the first ecclesiastical standpoints on the topic were relatively ambivalent. Cf. ORBÁN, Szabolcs (2004): *I diritti delle minoranze etniche in Europa. Uno studio analitico-etico sui loro fondamenti ed una proposta di fondazione nella prospettiva del bene comune*. Rome. 103–104.

In his several radio speeches,<sup>7</sup> Pope Pius XII touched upon the issue of minorities on several occasions. One of them, delivered in the midst of the war, outlining the picture of the new world order, established moral grounds and underlined five elements that could not find their place in this new world order.<sup>8</sup> He mentioned the national minorities among them and stated that: “In the new world order based on moral principles, there is no place for the overt or covert repression of the linguistic and cultural characteristics of national minorities, for the restriction or obstruction of their economic abilities, for the cessation or restriction of their natural fertility.”<sup>9</sup>

His successor’s, Pope John XXIII’s social activity continued Pius XII’s tradition, and his teachings on social issues tackled the problem of national minorities on several occasions. One of the most important documents on the matter was the encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963), which set forth in the very first point that: “The peace on earth that all people in the world have longed for at all times can only be created and consolidated by keeping the sacred order established by God.”<sup>10</sup> Next, the document deals with the interpretation of this order in the light of its different participants: it examines the interpersonal relationships, the relationship between the individual and public power within individual political communities, the relationship between political communities, the international community, and, finally, it ends with a pastoral conclusion. In the third part, the pope tackled the relationship among political communities and also spoke about the issue of national minorities, approaching it from the perspective of justice and stating that:

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<sup>7</sup> His name is not related to any papal social encyclicals; however, previously, he had a great impact with his radio speeches held on various occasions, which made it possible for the Catholic social teachings to reach a wider audience.

<sup>8</sup> Such as: the violation of the security, integrity, and freedom of nations; the oppression of national minorities; the mere egoistic speculations and the appropriation of the common economic resources on these grounds; the total war and the excessive militarist competition; the persecution of religions and the church. Cf. PIO XII (1942): Nuntius radiophonicus in pervigilio nativitatis D. N. Iesu Christi universo orbi datus (24 dicembre 1941). In: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 34. 10–21.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. 17.

<sup>10</sup> IOANNES XXIII (1963): *Pacem in terris*. In: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 55. 267. Transl. into Hungarian available at: <https://regi.katolikus.hu/konyvtar.php?h=122> (last accessed: 8 September 2019).

“In this matter, it must be said openly that what they do against these peoples to prevent their racial existence or prosperity is a serious violation of justice; and this is all truer if they are evilly seeking to exterminate this nation.

It is very much in line with the command of justice for state leaders to provide effective assistance to citizens of the minority in creating human conditions; this also applies to their language, culture, and economic situation.”<sup>11</sup>

A further ecclesiastical document touching on the issue of national minorities in several points is the *Gaudium et Spes* pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council dealing with the situation of the church in the modern world. The Council tackles the issue of minorities in the parts dealing with culture,<sup>12</sup> the life of the political community,<sup>13</sup> and peace,<sup>14</sup> also stipulating as follows:

“It is not the task of public authorities to determine what culture should look like but rather to create the conditions and help everyone, including national minorities, to live a cultured life.

Acts which deliberately disregard them [it is the natural law of the peoples], as well as orders issued for such acts, are therefore criminal offences... Such crimes include, above all, the extermination of entire peoples, nations, or national minorities, no matter the reason or the method: these horrific crimes must be condemned with relentless rigour.”

The first ecclesiastical document that exclusively deals with the issue of minorities is related to John Paul II's name: his traditional New Year's message of peace in 1989 titled *How to Build Peace and Respect Minorities*<sup>15</sup> was dedicated exclusively to this topic. Commenting upon the document, the Basque Cardinal Etcheagaray expressed his views

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<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. 283.

<sup>12</sup> CONCILIUM VATICANUM II (1966): *Constitutio pastoralis de ecclesia in mundo huius temporis, Gaudium et Spes*. In: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58. 1025–1120 (GS 59). Transl. into Hungarian available at: <https://regi.katolikus.hu/konyvtar.php?h=16> (last accessed: 8 September 2019).

<sup>13</sup> GS 73.

<sup>14</sup> GS 79.

<sup>15</sup> GIOVANNI PAOLO II (1988): *Per costruire la pace, rispettare le minoranze. Il messaggio in occasione della celebrazione della Giornata mondiale della pace (8 dicembre 1988)*. In: *L'Osservatore Romano, Speciale*. Vatican City. 9–10 December. I–IV.

as follows: “... it is a message in which every word counts and has to be regarded as a whole”.<sup>16</sup>

In this document, the Pope sets out two principles that must underpin all social organizations: the inalienable dignity of each individual and the fundamental unity of mankind.

In explicating these principles, John Paul II makes a far-sighted statement: human groups, including national minorities, have the right to a collective identity, which must be protected in the same way as the dignity of the individual members of the community.<sup>17</sup>

The document discusses certain rights related to minorities: it condemns any violation of the right to exist, emphasizes the right to preserve and develop one’s own culture, the right to build and maintain relationships, and speaks of religious freedom. Based on the document, the Pope is aware that there is still a long way to go before certain rights are put into practice, but he emphasizes the role of states and certain individuals in facilitating this process. Starting with an explanation of this role, the document also makes it clear that: “Delicate problems arise when a minority voices needs that also have specific political content. Sometimes a community strives for independence or at least greater political autonomy. I would like to emphasize that in delicate situations of this kind dialogue and negotiation are the mandatory path to peace.”<sup>18</sup>

We can see from the above quotations – but it can also be illustrated by other examples – that official teaching documents move on a general level: they acknowledge the existence of national minorities, condemn their attacks and the violation of their rights, and see dialogue and reconciliation as a way forward. If, on the other hand, we examine local ecclesiastical documents (episcopal circular letters, local synod decisions, sermons, etc.), we find ourselves confronted with a much more specific presentation of this issue. And there is nothing to be surprised about as local churches face the problems associated with minorities much more specifically, experiencing their complexity on their own.

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<sup>16</sup> ETCHEGARAY, Roger (1988): Un documento originale. Presentazione del messaggio per la giornata mondiale della pace 1989. In: *L’Osservatore Romano*. Vatican City. 9–10 December. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. GIOVANNI PAOLO II: *Per costruire la pace, rispettare le minoranze ...* Point 3.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. Point 10.

## *2. The Issue of Minorities on the Level of Local Churches*

When examining the statements of local churches about minorities, it is worth paying particular attention to the areas where the discussion of the topic has been intensively present in recent decades: South Tirol, Basque Country, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, Transylvania, etc. This is also a kind of constraint either from a linguistic point of view or because of the specific nature of the problems, but it is also interesting from the point of view of how the general guidelines outlined above appear in reality.

Here are just a few examples: during the Lent of 1960, Joseph Gargitter, still Bishop of Brixen (Bressanone), who in the following years would play a major role in the settlement of the situation in South Tirol, wrote the following concerning the ethnic heritage that had been created along history in one of his circulars in reference to the radio messages by Pius XII:

“Part of this heritage is the development of one’s own language, culture, customs and traditions, one’s own way of life, the indispensable living space and the continuity of one’s own social existence. There is no need for contracts and conventions that ensure the protection of these assets because they precede any agreement and therefore cannot be granted or withdrawn by human agreements. He who works to have the great natural values of a nation acknowledged fulfils a sublime mission which, with the legal means available, contributes to the preservation and maintenance of the order desired by God.”<sup>19</sup>

The papal statements on this issue resonate not only in the West but also in our country: Bishop Áron Márton’s sermon held in Csíksomlyó/Șumuleu Ciuc in 1946<sup>20</sup> clearly refers to Pius XII’s ideas. And here are the words that define the Bishop’s responsibilities: “Authorities were concerned that there would be open political demonstrations. But you came here to pray, and I rejoiced in your exemplary discipline on your way here. Return in similar discipline.”

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<sup>19</sup> GARGITTER, Joseph (1997): *Esigenze cristiane dell’ordine sociale in Alto Adige*. In Egger, Kurt (ed.): *Chiesa e minoranze etniche: documenti delle Chiese locali dell’Europa centro-occidentale*. Bologna, EDB. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Márton, Áron (1990): *Püspöki beszéde Csíksomlyón (1946)*. In P. Szőke, János: *Márton Áron. Nyíregyháza*. 458–462.

However, the bishop had to hear the great concern of his followers and say what they did not have the freedom to say. The hundreds of thousands who accompanied them from home in spirit prayed for this as well. “However, this is not politics. This is about our lives! And we have a right to human life from God. Our self-esteem and our responsibility for the fate of future generations require us to protest against the imposition and execution of an unjust judgment in defence of our rights.”

And that this was not merely a momentary oratorical flare-up is proven by the words with which Áron Márton closed his letter written to Petru Groza in 1946,<sup>21</sup> summarizing the serious problems that the Transylvanian Hungarians were concerned with:

“God created me Hungarian, and, of course, I cannot be indifferent to the fate and destiny of my brethren. And my pastoral vocation binds me to consider the issues from a moral point of view as well. The situation of the Hungarians living under Romanian rule does not meet the high moral requirements set out in the Charter of the United Nations as the guiding principles for peaceful coexistence. And if we want to sincerely promote peace among nations, I think we need to find a way to proceed in that direction. That is why I was brave to raise this most delicate issue before your Excellency with undisguised openness and to ask you not to be offended by my honesty.”

However, this was not the case only in Transylvania and not only 50 years ago. The church undertakes the same tasks today via local churches. This is proven by the following fragment from the declaration of the Czech and German bishops dated 9 March 1995: “It is not the task of the church to find solutions to these legal, economic, or political problems. But it is up to it to draw attention to the fundamental principles that such solutions must respect both for the benefit of individuals and for the common good.”<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps we can state that the role of the Church in relation to minorities is fundamentally articulated in this statement: its main task is to raise awareness of the principles and to find a solution based on them.

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<sup>21</sup> MÁRTON, Áron (n.d.): Levél Petru Groza miniszterelnökhöz. In: Domokos, Pál Péter: *Rendületlenül... Márton Áron Erdély püspöke*. Budapest, Szent Gellért. 245–252.

<sup>22</sup> Dichiarazione dei vescovi cechi e tedeschi, 9 marzo 1995. In: Egger, Kurt (ed.): *Chiesa e minoranze etniche...* 108.



We consider this to be particularly important because in the field of minority rights, although there has been some progress across Europe, the solution to this issue is far from visible, and we can even say that the repeated attempts over the last century have failed again and again. The reason for this may be that in these attempts minorities were always seen as a means to achieve something else that was good (or perhaps they considered important to address the minority issue as they saw a greater evil avoidable by it).

And this is also present as a kind of danger in the European Union's low-keyed attitude towards minorities: at the level of principles, the EU considers minorities to be important and valuable mainly because it sees us as a suitable means for strengthening relations between the nation-states that make up the community. However, it is to be feared that, for some reason, this relationship role will no longer be important, and the issue of national minorities and their rights will be completely left out of the European Union's viewing angle.

The so far unsuccessful, or at least very poor, attempts can certainly strengthen our conviction that the solution to the issue of national minorities must be sought at a deeper level than everyday politics (of interest): in order to find a good solution, the principles must be clarified, and then it will be possible to build on them to pin down specific rights and put them into practice.

This approach is represented by Professor Dieter Blumenwitz, who has dealt with the issue of national minorities quite extensively, examining it in several ways in his previously mentioned book, concluding that a lasting solution to this issue is not possible without a solid ethical foundation, and he sees this ethical basis in the social teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>23</sup>

### *3. Common Good and Subsidiarity*

The social teaching of the church could be discussed at length, and it should be in order to find a solution. Due to space limitations, we would now like to mention here only two concepts that are key elements to this teaching and along which it would be

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. BLUMENWITZ 2000, 16.

worth proceeding in order to provide the basis for the rights of minorities. These are two concepts: the common good and the principle of subsidiarity. Both may sound quite familiar: especially public good, which has come up frequently in the recent political discourse, but – perhaps not unfoundedly – only on the surface and without the centuries-old content behind the concept proper. From the point of view of the social teaching of the church, the mature definition of the common good is given in the document titled *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, stating that common good is: “the set of social living conditions that allow both groups and individual members to accomplish themselves entirely and easily”.<sup>24</sup>

The principle of subsidiarity is a more recent concept that also occasionally appears in various political statements. The first formulation in the ecclesiastical teaching is found in Pope Pius XI’s encyclical beginning with *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), which has been practically used ever since:

“What the individuals can accomplish with their own strength and abilities shall not be taken out of their authority and entrusted to the community; in the same way, all that a community organized on a smaller and lower scale can carry out and provide shall not be transferred upon a larger and higher organization, and it is at the same time a grievous sin, a subversion of the right order of society as any social activity is intrinsically bound to help, subsidize the parts of the entire society, separate parts of the whole of society, by the power that rests within, and it must never disintegrate or engulf the respective parts.”<sup>25</sup>

We are convinced that either of the two basic concepts as well as their application would have been able to provide a basis for the rights of national minorities as a solution to self-determination and, consequently, to the survival and development of national minorities. This, in turn, would require these concepts to go further than paying lip service in the social dialogue on this issue but also, together with their full content, to become an integral part of public thinking or at least of the thinking of those responsible for the life of society.

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<sup>24</sup> GS 26.

<sup>25</sup> ANZENBACHER, Arnold (2001): *Keresztény társadalometika*. Budapest, Szent István Társulat. 200.

#### *4. Summary*

The issue of national minorities is important to the Catholic Church: not only because it concerns its own members, either as a minority or as a majority, but also because the church has become increasingly sensitive to issues affecting human society in the last century. The importance of this issue is also evident from the fact that it is dealt with by church documents of different levels, which, on the one hand, discuss the basic elements and, on the other hand – in some cases –, seek the solution to the specific issue or problem in the given historical environment.

At the same time, the church is aware of the complexity of this issue and is aware of its role: in addition to condemning specific abuses, it is necessary to develop a preventive protection that can be achieved by establishing the rights of national minorities. It is not exclusively the opinion of ecclesiastical experts that certain elements of the church's social teaching can provide proper conditions for this foundation: in particular, the principles of the common good and subsidiarity seem to be suitable for elaborating a theory of self-determination of national minorities. It certainly should not just happen only within the confines of the church and should not happen in the offices of certain international organizations, but it would rather require a much broader, more comprehensive work implying the involvement of civil society in addition to the organizations mentioned above.

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