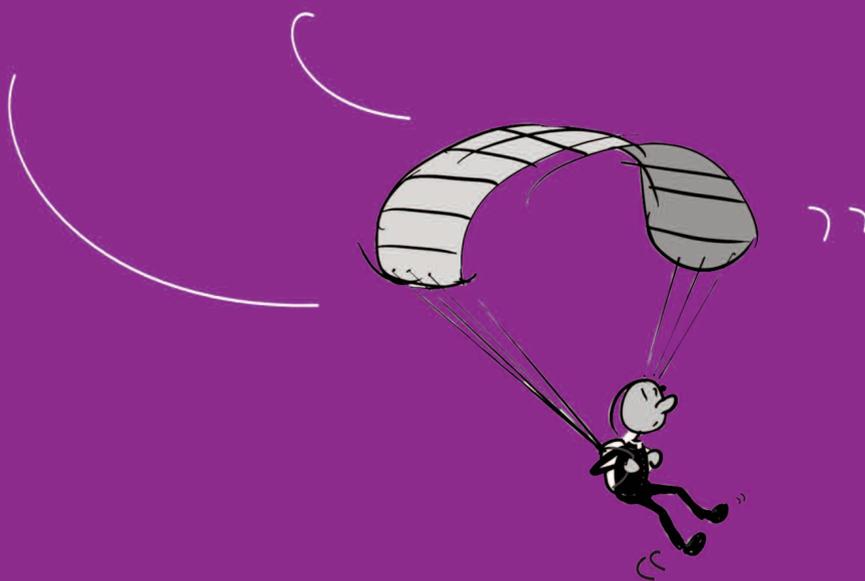


booklets

WINDS OF CHANGE
The Church and the signs
of the times



146

F. Javier Vitoria

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THE CHURCH AND THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES**

F. Javier Vitoria

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To those burned out,
to those fed up,
to those tired or simply bored
by the ways in which the institutional Church operates.
With the anticipation that the hope awakened by Vatican II
can be reborn from the ashes of its defeat.

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INTRODUCTION

«With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.» [GS 44a]

«The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit» (Jn 3:8). With these words Jesus of Nazareth invites Nicodemus to hear the voice of the Spirit of God. It is his *conditio sine qua non* for being born again and entering into the Kingdom of God (cf. Jn 3:3,5). A similar imitation from the Lord reaches the Church of the 21st century in these times of critical crossroads and bewildering crises. But it does so in a very particular way. The Breath of the Spirit is not a powerful wind which «roots up weeds and clears the paths of centuries of assaults» against justice and freedom, as we have so often sung, thanks to the inspiration of José Antonio Labordeta. Nor does it seem to be true that «the seed of the new age arrives with strong winds», as Carlos Cano sang when commemorating that giant of solidarity with the poor and of witness to the Gospel, Diamantino García. Rather, the Breath of the God of the Kingdom and of Jesus of Nazareth has the resonating intensity of that gentle, whispering breeze which the prophet Elijah heard on Mount Horeb (cf. 1 Kings 19,9-12). If we pay heed to Dolores Aleixandre, the Church needs to hear «the voice of a tenuous silence»¹ in an epoch and a space agitated by hurricane winds of every type. This task is not at all simple in the midst of such deafening clamor, but it is of vital importance for the Church.

With evangelical sensitivity and a wisdom that resembles that of handgliders, the Church has to know how to identify the voice of «God's Breeze»; it must find out where it is blowing and in what direction, so that it can be carried by its currents and not by "other gusts", even when these blow from the Vatican curia. And if anyone is bothered by this allusion to the curia, I invite them to heed a lesson from the Church's recent history: the Second Vatican Council, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, moved forward in opposition to the powers of the Vatican curia: it rejected some of the initial schemas that curial officials had prepared for debate and approval in the Council. The Breath of God is the only force

capable of transforming the present collapse of the ecclesial institution into a flight of salvific sacramentality for humankind [cf. LG 1]; only that Breath can re-orient the Church toward welcoming and serving the realm of the Kingdom. This booklet is written with the intention of sharing with the companions of Jesus' table this conviction: impelled by the Voice of God, strong winds of renewal are running through the Church.

The Breath of God comes surrounded by the fierce winds of change that today rush through our world. At times colliding, at times evading, these winds of change are always vying with other mighty currents which seek to smother them in order to maintain the "established disorder" in which we live. In this crucial historical context, the proclamation of God's Kingdom cannot be made if it is not accompanied by «the witness of the Holy Spirit's power, present in the action of the Christian community in the service of their brothers and sisters, at the points where their existence and the future are at stake» (Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens 51). We understand the signs of the times as the echoes of the gentle Breath of God, and we stress the importance of inquiring into them and discerning them so that a re-born Church can today bear witness to the power of the Spirit and fulfill its mission of announcing and establishing the Kingdom of God, since she herself is «the initial budding forth of that kingdom on earth» [LG 5].

1. THE CONCEPT «SIGNS OF THE TIMES»

The concept of the «signs of the times» is of very recent usage in the Church, going back only fifty years. On 25 December 1961, John XXIII introduced it into the language of the magisterium for the first time. He did so in a crucial historical context for the Church, when he convoked the Second Vatican Council with the Constitution *Humanae Salutis*. «Following the recommendation of Jesus, who encourages us to distinguish clearly the *signs of the times* (Mt 16,3), we believe that we can see, in the midst of so many shadows, many indications that makes us conceive better times for the Church and humankind»².

1.1. Usage

Paul VI also used the notion as a key for Church renewal:

«The purpose of this exhortation of Ours is not to lend substance to the belief that perfection consists in rigidly adhering to the methods adopted by the Church in the past and refusing to countenance the practical measures commonly thought to be

in accord with the character of our time. These measures can be put to the test. We cannot forget Pope John XXIII's word *aggiornamento*, which We have adopted as expressing the aim and object of Our own pontificate. Besides ratifying it and confirming it as the guiding principle of the Ecumenical Council, We want to bring it to the notice of the whole Church. It should prove a

stimulus to the Church to increase its ever growing vitality and its ability to take stock of itself and give careful consideration to the signs of the times, always and everywhere “proving all things and holding fast that which is good” (1 Th 5, 21) with the enthusiasm of youth.» [ES 50]

Finally, the Second Vatican Council, not without fierce debate in the council hall,³ consecrated the phrase definitively for ecclesial life.⁴ The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World designates discernment of the «signs of the times» as a task proper to the whole of God’s people, assigning it a triple finality: a) responding to the questions of each generation;⁵ b) perceiving the presence and the plans of God in history;⁶ and c) making revealed truth intelligible to modern-day people.⁷

We would do well to stop and reflect on a couple of the Council’s statements that today are in danger of being forgotten and even of being denied in practice.

1.1.1. To study, discern, and interpret the signs of the times

First, Vatican II states decisively that it is a task proper to «the whole People of God» to study, discern, and interpret the signs of the times, even though it recognizes that bishops and theologians play a major role in this task [cf. GS 44a]. Indirectly the Council is reminding us that ecclesial discernment of the will of God (that is, what is good for the Kingdom which God desires for «the whole People of God» in particular historical circumstances) is an intrinsic requirement of the following of Jesus

which no one in the Church should forget, prevent, or deny.

Consequently, we must consider contrary to the council tradition some statements in the Code of Canon Law regarding diocesan pastoral councils. According to the communion ecclesiology of Vatican II, the pastoral council should be the principal organ of expression of the communion and co-responsibility of any diocese or local Church. No other diocesan body represents «the whole People of God» better than the pastoral council. Consequently, it seems logical that the council be the preferred ecclesial space for convoking the People of God in a co-responsible manner to examine, discern, and interpret the signs of the times with the aim of announcing and establishing the Kingdom of God in that specific territory, since the local church is the seed of that Kingdom [cf. LG 5].

It does not therefore seem to be proper that the establishment of the pastoral council should depend on the good pleasure of the bishop; instead, it should be something normative in the life of the local churches, as is the case with the priests’ council (canon 495); nor is it proper that the vote of the council be merely consultative rather than deliberative (cf. CIC 511;514). The same despotism and the same consultative quality of vote are repeated again with regard to the pastoral councils at the parish level (cf. canon 536). Here we are dealing with the canonical image of a pyramidal Church, far removed from the conciliar Church. The hierarchy at its different levels –from the highest (the bishop) to the lowest (local pastor)–

can act as it pleases. Nothing impedes it. This is so for a very simple reason: there are no juridical controls on the exercise of its power. The Church thus becomes a fertile field for the misconduct of whoever is the current *Ottaviani*, searching out miscreants even if we don't know who they are.

The defenders of such folly usually take cover behind the affirmation that the Church is not a democracy, and they then produce a long string of pseudo-theological arguments. With each passing day, this type of discourse appears to be more tedious and more outlandish for the sensibility of modern men and women. The theological justification becomes increasingly inconsistent, and the interests which produce and maintain the discourse are seen to be less evangelical. Lack of autonomy in the pastoral councils weakens communion in the Church for, as the introductory explanatory note of *Lumen Gentium* states, the meaning of communion «is not about a vague *feeling*, but about an *organic reality* which requires a juridical form and is at the same time enlivened by charity».

My long experience of working on councils tells me that the progressive decline and loss of vitality in the pastoral councils have their origin in a realization that is becoming increasingly common among council members as the sessions progress: they are convoked by the bishop to treat matters of little importance for the life of the diocese. The really important matters are decided elsewhere by the usual bosses. Many good, capable people become bored or tired and give up because

they no longer believe that the council serves any purpose.

1.1.2. « *The principle of life* » of the Church

Second, J. I. González Faus recently recalled that Vatican II taught that «the true Church of Christ ‘subsists’ in the Catholic Church, but is not identified with her [LG8]» and that «this teaching is precisely, and significantly, the teaching that those who do not accept Vatican II are most eager to dismantle»⁸. Today we perhaps do well to recall a complementary teaching of the Council, one that is equally disregarded: the Roman Catholic Church is not the Kingdom of God, but only its herald, its handmaid, its «initial budding forth» [cf. LG 5]. As was stated above, none of this will be possible unless we listen to the Spirit who is «the principle of life or the soul» of the Church [cf. LG 7g;4] and unless we discern the signs of the times. But I must insist on still another Council teaching which some people would like to conceal: the Spirit is the soul of the Body of Christ, which is made up of the People of God, and those who are appointed leaders in the Church should not «extinguish the Spirit» but should «test everything and hold fast to that which is good (cf 1 Th 5,12.19-21)» [LG 12].

The public image of the Catholic Church contradicts and obscures this Council teaching. Anyone who views the Church from outside would be incapable of suspecting that the Council spoke in those terms. Rather it would appear that the Spirit is the “principle of life” of the hierarchy alone, and if

you really insist, of the Pope alone. Everything that lies outside the official formulae is repressed or prohibited by the hierarchs; there is no effort to test everything in order to hold fast to that which is good. The risk of extinguishing the Spirit is growing in the Roman Catholic Church. Dialogue has been rejected even though it is the only evangelical means for seeking the truth and creating communion. Instead, the option has been made to impose truth with the “bludgeon” of power and threat, a way of proceeding that has nothing to do with Jesus (cf. Lk 22,24-27). The questions debated within the Church (e.g., morality, the role of women, election and designation of bishops, democratization of ecclesial structures, the historical figure of priests, the style of evangelization, the nature of the Church’s public presence, etc.) are resolved by exercising despotic power and renouncing the evangelical authority of truth. With despotic procedures and imposition of authority, the conditions do not exist for discerning the signs of the times, as Jesus asked us to do (cf. Mt 16,3). The risk of confusing spirits foreign to Jesus with the signs of the Kingdom of God is very great.

To be sure, those who act in this way can do so with the same good will as Peter when he reproached Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi (cf. Mk 8,27-33); or they may be blinded by their zeal for religious control, like those who accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub (cf. Mt 12,22-28). The final result is always the same: they break the bruised reed and quench the smoldering wick,

in contradiction to the Spirit of the Servant (cf. Mt 12,20). When people act in this way, they are always disobeying the Lord. What is more, they contravene his express prohibition about «uprooting the weeds»⁹ (cf. Mt 13,29). In these circumstances the only remedy for reforming the Church lies in dissent.¹⁰

1.1.3. An ecclesiology with a pneumatic, charismatic dimension

I am convinced that this authoritarian way of proceeding is due to a multifaceted fear that has taken hold of the official Church. We should not forget that, according to the New Testament, the opposite of faith is fear. In a book dedicated to the Spirit, Víctor Codina has made an inventory of ecclesiastical fears, classifying them into sixteen categories.¹¹ The common denominator of all these fear-causing factors is that their mere presence calls into question the power and the privileges of the servants of the ecclesiastical apparatus. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees in the time of Jesus, these apparatchiks require of the questioners a sign from heaven –which they probably confuse with «the glory of Bernini»– so that they can trust in them (cf. Mt 16,1-3). But the signs of the newness of the Kingdom and the Spirit which God offers us are always *earthly* or *human* since otherwise they would mean nothing to us. These signs are necessarily *ambiguous*, for they simultaneously reveal and conceal God’s presence in history; they are *controversial*, because they are not the signs that we human beings naturally expect; and finally, they are *impure*, for they are invariably stained with the mud of human history.

The ecclesiastical institution needs to recover in a practical way its faith in the action of the Spirit as she vivifies, enlivens, and orients the whole of the People of God. What is needed, in brief, is an ecclesiology with a pneumatic, charismatic dimension. «The starting point of the Church's doctrine should be the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and her gifts», thus wrote J. Ratzinger forty-three years ago, commenting on the dangers of an ecclesiology elaborated exclusively on the basis of Christ's humanity. And he added: «Christ continues to be present through the Holy Spirit with an openness, an abundance, and a freedom that in no way exclude the institutional form or make it equivalent to worldly institutions but that do limit its pretensions»¹².

The symptoms of the practical negation of the pneumatic dimension of the Church are the one-sidedness of decision making, the silencing of dissenters, the repression of all novelty, the prohibition of experimentation in pastoral and evangelizing work, the reduction of the spaces of freedom, etc. These are all indications of an institutional Church which sets no limits on its pretensions and makes itself functionally equivalent to profane institutions of an autocratic nature.

In fidelity to its pneumatic dimension, the Catholic Church urgently needs to establish at all levels truly effective means for her communities to study and discern the signs of the times. Only in this way will the Church discover the way to the reform which she constantly needs insofar as she is an earthly, human institution [cf. UR 6].

1.2. The meaning

In the years since Vatican II, the expression «signs of the times» has progressively become a basic category of the evolving post-conciliar theology for defining the particular relations between the Church and the world. Nevertheless, the expression is not always used with the same meaning.

The signs of the times are generally considered to be those social and cultural phenomena which, due to their generalization and great frequency, characterize a particular epoch and express the needs and aspirations of humankind. They are remarkable phenomena which point toward forms of human existence that are more just and more dignified. For those who know how to read them as such, their significance is not imposed from without but is embodied in the historical reality. Some of the criteria for identifying them are their specific nature, the indications of the better times they point to, the collective consensus they awaken, and their irreversibility.¹³

This is how the signs of the times are ordinarily understood in the texts of Vatican II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. Until the time of the Council, the Church had been in permanent confrontation with modernity. Insensitive and inflexible in the face of the changes the world was going through, the Church cut itself off from the world in order not to become contaminated or fall into the temptation of change. Renewed awareness of the signs of the epoch had two very salutary effects for the Church:

1) It was seen as a wake-up call or even a fire alarm. Something was wrong in the Church. The changes taking place in the modern world were implicitly demanding changes in the Church.

2) It was recognized as an indication that the values of modernity (e.g., democracy, human rights, economic development, social-democratic social transformations, scientific rationality, etc.) should be given favorable recognition, and it was seen as an impulse for better adaptation of the Church to modern societies.¹⁴ Implicitly the theme of the signs of the times became an antidote to fear of «the winds of change», a fear which unfailingly leads to suffocation of the Spirit.

But there is another use of the concept that seems to me more decisive for the life of the Church. In a faithful reading of Mt 16,1-3, the expression «signs of the times» should be reserved for the signs of the Reign of God. I agree with Luis González-Carvajal, who states that the signs of the times «are not signs of the *present times*, but signs of the *last times*. Consequently, not all the characteristic features of an epoch are ‘signs of the times’, but only those in which salvation is made manifest»¹⁵.

1.2.1. *Discernment*

Accordingly, in discerning the signs of the times, the Church seeks «to know what is to be done at the present moment so that the times announced by Jesus become reality»¹⁶. The People of God studies and discerns the signs of the times in order to discover how this present history is progressing with

respect to the Reign of God which Jesus announced and made present. Thus, the discernment of the signs of the times serves many purposes: it reveals the state of justice and law in the world (cf. Jer 23,5; 33,15; Is 11,4-5); it judges whether there is good news for the poor of this earth (cf. Lk 4,16-19); it determines whether in the 21st century God is removing the powerful from their thrones and exalting the lowly and whether God is filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty; and it detects whether human solidarity is progressing according to the plan of the God of the Kingdom, the «Father/Head of the human family».¹⁷

Open-eyed mysticism, which we’ve heard so much about in recent years, needs to be nourished by discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that often in the Church and our Christian communities we give the impression of being up in the sycamore tree, but not in the same one as Zacchaeus (cf. Lk 19,1-10), and the Lord passes by without taking notice. The tremendous task of responding «to the constant questions that people ask about the meaning of this life, the future life, and the relation between the two» (cf. GS 4 and 11) requires a Church that is experienced in interpreting the signs that indicate the vitality of God’s Kingdom among us and in making those signs her very own. The exercise of discerning the signs of the times has “opened the eyes” of the Church, which progressed from condemning the modern world to blessing it. This change in Church practice reminds me of the

story of Balaam who, when asked by the Moabite king to curse Israel, ended up blessing it, but not without first being obliged by God to «get off his donkey» (cf. Nm 22-24)¹⁸.

The ability to *detect* signs of the Kingdom amid the ambiguities of our present time should be a part of all ecclesial life, from top to bottom. The Church is not a special enclosure where the Spirit becomes manifest in exclusive ways which require bureaucratic management. The Church of «the signs» is a kind of “radar” which discovers and points out those realities of our world where the Spirit of the Kingdom is being revealed, often unbeknownst to the principal actors. The Church’s ways of acting should not go back to reflecting the ecclesiology of a “walled fortress,” protected from the world and at war with it. Rather the Church should embrace an ecclesiology which serves as a “finger pointing out” the passage of God through history, for as Vatican II reminds us, God’s Kingdom is already present among us [cf. GS 39].

1.2.2. *Reign of God*

In no way do I mean to confuse the present Reign of God in the world with its universal goal. It would be one-sided to contemplate the Reign of God only in its eschatological consummation. In like manner, it is wrong to identify the Reign of God with its anticipations in history. The Reign of God acts in history in a hidden, conflicted manner. Its anticipations are the *immanence* of the eschatological Reign of God, and the coming Reign is the *transcendence* of

those anticipations, which are the object of faith and experience. Such an understanding prevents us both from situating the Reign of God in a “beyond” which has no relation with earthly life and from identifying it with a particular situation of history. Without the transcendent counter-figure of the Reign of God, its anticipations lose their point of orientation. Without the immanent anticipations of the Reign, its transcendent future becomes a mere “utopian” illusion. That is why the Church, in serving the Reign of God, should practice obedience to the will of God, who transforms the world, and should pray for the coming of the Kingdom. We do this each time we pray the «Our Father».¹⁹ This is what the early Christians did when they cried «Maranatha!» and prayed for the second coming of the Lord to bring an end to their suffering.²⁰

1.3. **The signs of the Reign of God in «contrast experiences»**

This qualitative or kairological conception of time does not mean that study and discernment of the signs of the times should be carried out exclusively in terms of the positive qualities of each epoch. Such a procedure would be a most serious error, the result of a fundamentalist and naively optimistic conception of the «winds of change», a conception criticized by W. Benjamin and J. B. Metz. The Church needs to learn to decipher, even in the negativity of our world, what signs there are of the Reign of God (whether they are in danger or denied, whether [apparently] defeated or crucified) –always with a view to

disclosing them and defending them. This type of exercise is required by the wisdom of the cross.

Jesus of Nazareth is the Primordial Sign of the Kingdom, the one who makes God's signs intelligible to the eyes of faith. But the Sign of the signs was in his days a sign of contradiction (cf. Lk 2,34) and caused division among the people (cf. Jn 7,43). There were many who did not allow him to point out what the God of the Kingdom did not desire –a religion that covered up injustice (cf. Mt 9,10-13)– or to confront the demons in the name of God's Reign (cf. Mk 1,24; 5,7). They eliminated him on the cross. After his resurrection, the human figure of the Primordial Sign will be forever the crucified Christ, the strength and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1,18-25).

This wisdom is constantly inviting the Church to study and discern the signs of recent times in what have been called «contrast experiences», that is, experiences which *point out what God does not want*,²¹ namely, what is diabolical in our world and opposed to God's Reign. The light of the Crucified One reveals the aspects of reality that our world's dominant forces deny or conceal by resorting to “sensible, reasonable” discourse to justify and consolidate their supremacy. This light unveils what is really happening in the world but remains hidden at the behest of the powerful.

It is precisely this wisdom of the cross that makes discernment of the signs of the times anything but an inoffensive task for the Church. Such discernment becomes instead a dangerous task, and

yet one that saves the Church. According to the extra-canonical saying of the Gospel of Thomas (*Logion* 82), Jesus says, «The one who is close to me is close to fire; the one who is far from me is far from the Kingdom». According to J. B. Metz, danger and threat constitute the basic situation of the Church in the world:

«Wherever Christianity becomes more settled and less burdensome, wherever it becomes easier to live, wherever it becomes for many a symbolic sublimation of what is happening anyway and what to that extent the world determines, there its messianic future is weak. In contrast, wherever Christianity is difficult to maintain and shows itself rebellious, wherever it promises more danger than security, more turmoil than protection, there it finds itself closer to the one who seems to have said: “The one who is close to me is close to fire; the one who is far from me is far from the Kingdom”..»²²

1.3.1. Historical anticipations of the Kingdom of God

The crucified wisdom of the signs of the Kingdom does not avoid the sense of confusion so often brought on by the apparent inevitability of what is happening and the persistence of structural injustices, which produce so many human victims and ecological disasters. But such wisdom provides the divine energy needed to overcome that befuddled state of soul, for it reveals the real possibilities of a fresh new future that are contained in every historical moment.

This wisdom identifies signs of the life of the Crucified One in the “death rows” of our world, and it makes possible an even greater discovery: in the cracks of the system of death there are signs of life; in this immense sea full of shipwrecks there are people who ingeniously manage to stay afloat; in the center of the eye of the hurricane can already be seen “islands of hope” toward which we can move; with our captivity “liberated zones” arise; in the midst of the generalized apathy there is still a capacity for people to become indignant; in our society of servants networks of freedom are created; in the slums on the outskirts of our satisfied culture alternative practices are promoting the global village... All these realities are historical anticipations of the Kingdom of God. Having contact with them makes it easier to continue the struggle without throwing in the towel or burning out. Such an encounter renews our energies and allows us to continue to fight, now in the present, for a future which has all the fragility of what still does not exist and which cannot be demonstrated or manipulated. Such an encounter allows us to keep hoping for the coming of the Reign of God, which keeps getting delayed; it impels us to refuse to give up anybody as impossible; it provides us with a stubborn confidence that the seed of God’s Reign is still at work in ourselves and in others.

1.4. The poor and the discernment of the signs of the times

Luis González-Carvajal proposes three hermeneutical criteria for the process of

discerning the presumed signs of the times: sociological analysis, theological analysis, and investigation of their potential meaning in our spiritual universe, at least for those men and women who do not imprison the truth with injustice (cf. Rom 1,18).²³

1.4.1. Sociological analysis

The theory of knowledge has taught us that there are no neutral or innocent readings of reality. Nor are there any of the signs of the times. Everything is seen according to the color of the glass through which it is viewed, as the Spanish saying goes. Or as Mario Benedetti fittingly corrects the saying: everything *is* according to the pain with which it is seen. All our viewings of reality take place through a contact lens called pre-understanding, which is “fabricated” with diverse materials: our vital group interests (without interests there is no possibility of knowledge), our cultural and ideological baggage, our social situation, and even our own psychology. The key to successful seeing consists in preventing this inevitable *pre-understanding* from becoming *prejudice* that domesticates our reading of reality. It is therefore necessary to be aware of the possible existence of unconscious presuppositions which can blind us to the fact that we are straining out the mosquito and swallowing the camel (cf. Mt 23,24). Furthermore, reality is always viewed from some territorial or social perspective. In this regard, it can be stated that there is no ideal extraterritorial viewpoint from which we can observe what is around us, and so there is no unconditioned way of

viewing reality. The present economic crisis is not perceived in the same way from Germany as from Greece; the Ibex 35 is not viewed the same way from the Madrid Stock Exchange as from the hovels of the city's worst slums; an eviction notice is not felt in the same way in a bank office as in the foreclosed house.

1.4.2. *Theological analysis*

All these sorts of conditionings affect the discernment of the signs of the times. Certainly Vatican 2's view of the modern world and its search for the signs of the times were conditioned by the great empathy it felt toward modernity, but also, and perhaps unconsciously, they came from a bourgeois Eurocentric mentality and a Christian Democratic vision of reality. The subsequent history shows clearly how the Council has been received under other types of conditioning, geared either to encouraging or to dampening the Council spirit. In this respect, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote some years ago:

«The reception [of the Council] supposes certain differences, which in this case exist between the historical context of the Church in Latin America and that of the European world, and the latter is the basis of the universal perspective of the Council. [...] It is not possible to forget, however, that this reception has a clear and necessary mediation, passing through acceptance of the Council's insistence on being attentive to the signs of the times. In the case of the Latin American Church,

that means observing firsthand the inhuman situation of poverty and oppression in which the vast majority of the people of this continent live and being sensitive to their aspirations for freedom. But this cannot be truly done if those realities are not challenged with the message of God's Kingdom.»²⁴

1.4.3. *Observation*

Does the Gospel recommend any perspective for the observation and the discernment of the signs of the times? It seems to me that it does so, indirectly. As the historical Jesus himself declared (cf. Mt 11,25), the situation of the poor offers a privileged vantage point for observing and discerning the signs of God's Reign. L. Cornie expressed this gospel perspective with the formula, «the hermeneutic privilege of oppressed persons or peoples», which has been criticized as ambiguous.²⁵ Certainly we cannot resolve theoretically the argument put forward by those who criticize the formula, but it is important that we reach at least the following consensus: the hermeneutic of the poor is indeed "privileged," even if not «exclusive, because it is that which the Church most needs to hear».

From this affirmation it is relatively easy to deduce another: the Church of today must unavoidably focus on the *situation* of the victims produced by capitalist globalization for her discernment of the signs of the times. It is there that the Church will «have her eyes opened» and will find unsurpassed access to the revelation of the signs of

God's Reign. All the signs are a prelude to the winds of change, which sweep across religious and cultural borders, making another world not only necessary but possible. Only so will the "global village" reach, in its every cor-

ner, a higher state of integral human development and a global display of justice, freedom, fraternity and peace. Only so will we human beings become different and live more humanly, more truly.

2. FOUR PRESENT-DAY SIGNS OF THE REIGN OF GOD

In the powerful light coming from the poor and illuminating the dark regions of our world,²⁶ I want to discuss four present-day signs of the new times inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth: the inequalities in the world, the emancipation of women, cultural diversity, and democracy. Certainly these are not the only ones –there are others, no doubt. But those mentioned seem to me to be the ones that the Church most needs to heed and obey at this time. Each one of them is an opportunity for a rebirth of the Spirit, who is present to all the People of God and not just the hierarchy, although the latter obviously has greater responsibility for attending to the Breath of God contained in the winds of change.

2.1. The inequalities in the world

«The economic crises which afflict our countries after times of growth and prosperity can make us even blinder than we already were». With these words Rafael Díaz-Salazar begins his small book on international inequalities.²⁷ His allusion to chronic blindness and his cry –justice now!– confirm my old conviction that world poverty is the greatest sign of God’s crucified Reign.²⁸ Nothing can compare to the obscure structural inequality of our world in providing proof that the Reign of God

is in no way proceeding as it should. Nothing is comparable, not even moral relativism, despite the great determination to denounce relativism in season and out. There is nothing equivalent, to use the words of Jaime Gil de Biedma, to «the pain of so many people reviled, rejected, and reduced to the bottom of the pile, poor beasts haltingly advancing along a hostile road, without knowing where they are going or who sends them, feeling at each step that smothered breath behind them and that hot vapor on their neck that is the vertigo of

instinct, the fear of the stampede –forward animal, move forward, getting up to fall again, to give up finally, face down, and surrender the soul because nothing more can be done with it». Nothing validates better the conclusion of the poet from Barcelona than the brutal injustice of our world: «That’s how the world is, and that’s how men are». For all God’s people, that extraordinary domain of suffering should be, in contrast, a sign of the permanent historical annihilation of the mystery of godliness (cf. 1Tim 3,16). And we pastors and theologians must contribute to its discernment. In this community of suffering persons the Church experiences the privileged prolongation of the silenced communication of the God/Love that descends toward us. In that multitude of human beings, poised as a Christ, the historical memory and making present of the event of Calvary becomes active. In the «poignant, inaudible cries of those who no longer expect anything from anyone...», the Church can identify echoes of the groans and the pains of the birth of the new creation, emerging from the divine womb of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8,14-27).

«That immense deposit of human suffering» is a living metaphor of Jesus crucified and at the same time a sign of the mystery of iniquity and of human injustice (cf. Rom 1,18). It points out exactly that which the powerful of the world –the employers, the bankers, the central bank directors, and the politicians who share with them their neo-liberal ideology– try to hide at all costs: *the idol of death* that capitalism has produced.

2.1.1. *Capitalism: «fundamental reality»*

The warning of John Paul II about the danger of falling into «an idolatry of the market» fell on rocky soil twenty years ago. Other ecclesiastical interests and concerns muted those prophetic words of the Pope. Now is the time to speak loud and clear about capitalism as one of the supreme religious icons of our present-day western culture. The economic crisis we are now suffering has made it clear, in case there was still any doubt, that the true absolute of our globalized world is Capital. The power that money has to unite and interconnect people has essentially replaced the power of religion. The «fundamental reality» which determines everything is no longer God, but capitalism. *Mammon* has returned in a capitalist version, and today more than ever it is the antagonist par excellence of the Christian God (cf. Mt 6,24).

If the Church of the 21st century makes this its sign of God’s Reign, then the discourse about the need for an economy that serves people, such as that recently offered by the Basque bishops in an impeccable joint pastoral, will not be sufficient. Nor will it be enough for the Church to demand «a new, more profound reflection on the meaning of the economy and its aims, as well as a wide-ranging revision of the development model to correct its dysfunctions and deviations», as Benedict XVI proposes in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* [32]. To be true to its vocation as «the initial budding forth of God’s kingdom on earth», the Church must

perforce look within herself. The People of God need to purify their faith in the God of the Kingdom and defend it, even as they run the risk of offering the prescribed sacrifice to the divinized “emperor”, without resistance and with new vestments.²⁹ The sign of human equalities confronts the Church with the task of detecting the idolatry in her own ranks and institutions, since the Church has also for a long time been submitted to the power of money and has harbored crypto-apostasy in its bosom. She has no other way to begin to rid herself of her complicities in the barbarous situation of world poverty.

Discernment of the sign of inequalities in the world suggests the vision of market capitalism as the present-day version of the fourth imperial power of the book of Daniel. Modern capitalism becomes not “anthropomorphic” but “zoomorphic”: it becomes a terrible “beast”, frightful and very strong; with its enormous teeth of iron it devours the poor, and it grinds and crushes them under its hooves (cf. Dan 7,7). At the same time, the sign of inequalities reminds the Church that it is called to be «the initial budding forth» of the fifth kingdom of the prophet’s vision, a kingdom «in human shape» as a «son of man» who proceeds from God (Dn 7,13-14) and whose «way of governing» seeks a universal program of global justice.³⁰

If the People of God make this their sign, then they will feel invited to make their style of life ever more “anthropomorphic,” and thus distance themselves from the “zoomorphic” styles promoted by capitalism. That is how some people

view us: «Christians want to transform our respectable Muslim homes into markets. [...] They want us to buy those poisonous products of theirs, which have no real purpose, so that we become a nation of cattle. The people spend their days stuffing trash into their mouths instead of praying to Allah»³¹.

2.1.2. Universal equality and fraternity

A pretense of universal equality and fraternity, which costs the members of the rich churches little, is literally defrauding the expectations of the victims of the world’s inequalities. It is not enough simply to be in favor of liberating people from infernal situations of exclusion and marginalization. Even the Gerasenes wanted Jesus to free the demoniac from his unclean spirit since nobody could control him, not even with chains. Their error was to believe that the victory over the demon would have no consequences for themselves. When they realized that they had recovered their neighbor sane and sound, but had lost their pigs, they asked Jesus to leave their district (cf. Mk 5,1-20). I cannot help but write at times with notes of irony for, as is well known, pigs are like our quality of life: there is nothing wasted in them. Feelings are not enough. We need austere, maverick lifestyles of solidarity which announce an alternative civilization of fraternity, equality, and freedom. Christianity provides us with energy and wisdom for making the attempt and inspires in us hope for achievement.³²

This sign of inequality also relates to alternative ways of dealing with the

market. There are many things that we as members of the People of God can do –and that we are in fact already doing– to bring about changes in the economic sphere: we can defend the existence of alternatives for resolving the crisis;³³ we can promote fair trade; we can sanction businesses that exploit workers to reduce their costs; we can develop businesses with social objectives; we can insist on the social and corporate responsibility of firms; we can promote banking ethics, etc.

But I would like to insist on something that I have defended on other occasions. The Breath of God is today seeking economic experts who, without fear of professional consequences, allow the force of that Breath to move and direct them in the search for alternative economic models. This is something that should be kept in mind by the business schools which recently have proliferated extensively in Catholic universities. To the extent that they make inequality their sign, that is, insofar as they make it blood of their blood and flesh of their flesh, they will discover that the existence of well staffed ethics departments will not be enough to guarantee that the university is truly of service to the Kingdom of God. There should not be an institutional assumption that «there is no need of ethics because we know what is ‘good’; rather, it should be because we have lived through the experience of evil and been witnesses to it. Ethics does not cease to exist because one has done one’s ‘duty,’ but because our response has been adequate, though it can never be sufficiently adequate. Ethics does not

cease to exist because we are ‘worthy,’ or because we have dignity as persons, but because we are sensitive to what is unworthy, to the indignities visited on those excluded from the human condition, on those dehumanized and not considered persons.»³⁴

2.1.3. *Symbolic gestures*

Finally, the sign of inequality is an invitation to carry out symbolic gestures which makes us contemplate and generate visions of another future. These include practices which evoke the *return of the market to God* and its disassociation from Capital, just as the miraculous catch of fish (cf. Jn 21,1-11) signified the return of the lake to God: it proclaimed that the Sea of Galilee did not belong to Rome but to God –the lake was under the power not of Antipas but of Jesus.³⁵

To conclude this point, I will mention a symbolic gesture suggested to me by an item in the press. A religious sister named Nora Nash has in recent years become the most disturbing visitor to the offices of the great corporations. The directors of Goldman Sachs, British Petroleum, and Lockheed Martin, among others, have been obliged to listen to her gentle but implacable reproaches. She and her Franciscan sisters decided that they would address the commanders of the economy through shareholder activism: they buy stock in the companies in order to take part in the shareholder meetings. In this way they are able to talk face to face with the people making the decisions they want to protest against. This is similar to the protests

that are staged in the United States by the activists of the Occupy Wall Street movement. These strategies have also become well known in Spain through SETEM, an organization which has spoken out in the shareholders' meetings of various banks and has launched campaigns such as «BBVA without weapons», which condemns that bank's investment in military armament.

I would be delighted to see this type of shareholder activism practiced with regard to the authorities of the Catholic Church. As a first step, each institution (diocese, religious order, Catholic organization, etc.) should make public their share holdings in companies listed on the stock exchange. Once the accounts of the People of God have been stated clearly, the various heads of church institutions (Pope, bishop, superior general, etc.) would become activists at shareholder meetings, where they would remind others of such matters as the ethical criteria of the Church's social doctrine. I do not have the least doubt about the beneficial effects that this type of activism, so reminiscent of Jesus' action in the temple of Jerusalem, would have for the poor of the world. We should hope that such a symbolic gesture would produce results and be imitated more widely, but we should not entertain illusions that it will work out that way.

2.2. Emancipation of women

The long struggle that women have waged for their emancipation is another important sign of the times that the Church should make her own. From

time immemorial women have been victims of the patriarchy, a system of cultural domination in which, as Manuel Castells writes:

«Men kept for themselves power, production, and war, and women had to assume everything else. From that historical division there arose two cultures, one dominating, the other dominated, and these were transformed into essences by myths of what is masculine and what is feminine, until they appeared something natural. Of course there were constant rebellions, both individual and collective, because the organization of society does not totally determine what people think and do. But the state, in whatever form it took, including the church as part of it, made sure that things remained as they were. [...] That is patriarchy. We all come from that tradition and share its prejudices and ways of being. And that is how women have come to exist as a collective culture and as an individual personality.»³⁶

2.2.1. Patriarchal order

Even though women's lives have changed more in the last hundred years than they did in the three thousand previous years, the patriarchal order continues to cast its long shadow over the history we are creating. To corroborate this statement, we need only cite the empirical evidence showing that women are the world's most impoverished human beings: some 67% of the poor people in the world are women. Moreover, we should not forget that in most of the

world women end up deprived simply for being women: they suffer discrimination not only as regards access to decision-making positions in politics and economics, but also as regards access to basic goods such as food, education, and health care. What is more, one-third of all women in the world suffer physical and/or sexual abuse.³⁷

In contrast, the sign of women's emancipation makes it clear that the patriarchal order is perhaps the oldest historical figure of the anti-Kingdom. It makes us aware that women are the ones who most deserve to be called the "vicars" of Christ in our world, since the great majority of the "heartrending, inaudible cries of those who no longer hope for anything from anybody" are theirs.

The stories of women's emancipation are accounts of resistance to and transformation of that inhuman power which brutalizes the condition of women and dehumanizes the condition of men. The conquests of women are signs of their partial victories over «the power of the inhuman»; they are historical anticipations of the irruption of the Reign of God in a way similar to the liberating, exorcizing activity of Jesus of Nazareth or the victory of the risen Christ over the cosmic powers of domination, as announced by Pauline preaching (cf. Ep 1,20-22).³⁸

The women's liberation movement brings with it winds of change and provokes experiences of «the Spirit's breath» in the Church, so that she will become again «the initial budding forth of the Kingdom on earth». It will not be at all easy to recognize this sign of the

Kingdom, which radiates forth from the margins of the dominant androcentric, patriarchal tradition which now envelops the ecclesiastical institution. Heeding this sign will require conversion, change of mentality, reform of practices.

2.2.2. *The ecclesial patriarchy*

The ecclesial patriarchy is one of the most consistent forms of that structure of cultural domination, since it understands itself to be divinely established. The males in ecclesial government claim that their power has been delegated by God and they exercise it by divine mandate. Moreover, until very recently in the Church, women have been considered as inferior to men in mental, moral, and physical ability; they were created only partly in the image of God and are even conceived as malignant symbols of evil. And in contrast with all that, they have been de-personalized and made into a romantic, asexual ideal whose fullness derives especially from motherhood. Even today women occupy only a marginal place in the official life of the Catholic Church. They are excluded from full participation in the sacramental system and from public leadership in the Church. They have no access to the centers where the most important decisions are made, where laws are established, and where symbols are elaborated. That is to say, women are a majority much needed in the Church, but have only limited value.³⁹ This situation seems to be unsustainable. In the present conditions, we should at least recognize that the Church makes it very difficult for women to

contemplate her as «the initial budding forth of God's kingdom on earth».

Often I have thought that the Church did much more for the abolition of slavery on the day that she named a slave to be a priest than she did when she recognized as the word of God the letter to Philemon, in which Paul asks his friend to receive the slave Onesimus as a beloved brother. That symbolic gesture of ordination did not put an end to slavery in the world, but it inspired a vision that another world of universalized liberty was possible. Today the sign of women's emancipation seeks from the institutional Church a symbolic practice of the same sort; it asks that the Church recognize the liberating potential that the feminist cause has for all humankind and that she inspire a vision that another world is possible, one in which the feminist cause has in fact become universalized.⁴⁰

2.2.3. An important and urgent examination

This new ecclesial practice will be possible only if it is preceded by an examination of the androcentrism which has been inoculated into Catholic tradition. For this purpose, dialogue with the positive critical contribution of feminist theology is necessary. Closing off such dialogue with a fundamentalist reading of ecclesiastical doctrine will succeed only in delaying changes which the Catholic Church is obliged to realize if she wishes to keep its sacramental vocation relevant [cf. LG 1]. The ecclesiastical authorities can learn about their own history regarding women. It is not in vain that they have revised and re-

jected the teaching of Thomas Aquinas about the defective nature of women (cf. S.T., q.92, a.1, ad.1). Or am I mistaken?

I point out three theological spaces where revision seems to be important and urgent:

1) Language about God that uses masculine terms in an exclusive, literal, and patriarchal manner.⁴¹

2) A theology of the cross that has served to reinforce the system of submission endured by women.⁴²

3) The use of allegorical and symbolic images from scripture as normative portrayals of the essence of femininity and masculinity, thus concealing the face of flesh-and-blood women, their daily existence, and the sore wound of discrimination.⁴³

The winds of change imbibe the Breath of God, which pushes the hierarchy to go beyond the present ecclesiastical construction of woman's being, a construction quite incapable of channeling the flow of liberation and justice that God's reign has introduced into history.

2.3. Cultural pluralism

One of the many paradoxes that characterize our world is that the increasing globalization goes hand in hand with cultural and religious differentiation. Cosmopolitanism and particularity are not opposed realities; rather they are complementary. We find ourselves in an epoch of interwoven differences. The diverse cultures present in our world not only exist next to one another, but they also maintain dynamic relations among

themselves. As we are reminded by a UNESCO report, we need these relations and should learn to orient them not toward confrontation, but toward a mutually enriching coexistence in intercultural harmony.⁴⁴

This desideratum finds itself quite threatened in our day. The West is promoting the North American cultural model throughout the world in ways that are both obstinate and overbearing. The North seeks to universalize its cultural model with astonishing unrestraint. The charm and the richness of cultural diversity are forced to give way before the overwhelming offensive of standardization, homogenization, and uniformity. «People see all around them how the excuse of modernity is used to reduce everything to the level of sterile uniformity. From one end of the planet to the other, an unvarying lifestyle is imposed, propagated by the mass media and rigorously prescribed by mass culture. From La Paz to Ouagadougou, from Kyoto to Saint Petersburg, from Oran to Amsterdam, we find the same movies, the same television series, the same news sources, the same songs, the same advertising slogans, the same electronic devices, the same clothing, the same cars, the same urbanism, the same architecture, the same type of apartments, often furnished and decorated in the same fashion . . .»⁴⁵ This kind of cultural universalization has earned the name «coca-colonization».⁴⁶

Interculturality is a socio-political project in which there is a carefully planned confluence of: a) acceptance of and respect for preexisting cultural diversity;

b) re-creation of each and every one of the existing cultures; and

c) the emergence of a new synthesis. Such a project has still not progressed beyond theoretical laboratory experiments or demands for unrecognized rights. Nevertheless, the need to move in that direction is every day more urgent.

2.3.1. *Cultural identity*

With ever greater frequency the West meets up with the refusal of other cultures to identify modernization with westernization. Over and over again they remind the West that its attempt to universalize its culture is *false* because it scorns the reality of cultural diversity; it is *immoral* because it conceals within it the pretension of imperial power; and it is *dangerous* because it defends in fundamentalist fashion the non-negotiable character of its vision of values such as progress, technology, democracy, and especially the global market. Opposition to this cultural violence is bringing about a reorganization of the world, in which ethnic consciousness and feminine consciousness are the most active agents. The waves of indigenous revival and resurgence non-western cultures are sweeping over our planet. But accompanying them are the banners and other symbols of cultural identity (such as crosses, crescents, head coverings, religions, etc.) that have taken on exceptional importance. Individuals and groups discover both new and old identities that they are ready to defend, even to the point of waging war against enemies, both new and old. There

is a growing risk of a «clash of civilizations» (S. P. Huntington) or a «clash of cultures» (F. Fernández Buey), the dimensions of which could be enormous.

Given the marginality of the threatened cultures, cultural pluralism is seen to be a sign of God's Reign, a historic opportunity (a *kairos*) for bringing about in the 21st century the same inversion of the logic of Babel that took place on Pentecost (cf. Ac 2,1-11). A project of intercultural harmony for our world is being encouraged and made possible by the emergence of the Spirit of God in all cultures.

If Church authority takes this sign of the times to heart, it will have to face up to a gigantic change in the historical configuration of the Church itself. It will have to travel by new cultural routes, ceasing to be a Church with an excessively and exclusively Eurocentric culture and resituating itself in the world as a universal Church that is culturally polycentric (J. B. Metz).

2.3.2. *A Church with an excessively Eurocentric culture*

Christianity continues to be exclusively embedded in western culture. The universal destiny of the Gospel has been seriously compromised for centuries now as a consequence of its (mis-) encounter with Amerindian, Asian, and African cultures. The missionary task, reinitiated in the 16th century, was incapable of perceiving the distinction between faith and culture and was therefore unable to appreciate the importance of the distinction. The final results were evangelization confused with westerni-

zation. Faith (whether proposed or imposed) was indivisibly joined to an alien culture opposed to the native culture. What was more serious still, innumerable human victims and cultural devastation resulted from this misadventure. Five centuries later, the Roman Curia continues to bestow an absolute character on the Western/Roman interpretation of Christianity, thus guaranteeing the impermeability of other cultures to the Gospel. Such a way of acting closes the doors of these “minoritized” cultures to Christ, even as they are paradoxically and pathetically asked to open them up. The Judaizing conflict over circumcision continues to reproduce itself in the Church of the 21st century: today it is not necessary to be Jewish in order to be Catholic, but it is indispensable that one be culturally western and European. The pressure of centralized Roman power represses to the point of suffocation the legitimate desires of the local Churches for inculturation of the Gospel. It does so to the point that even now it is more precise to speak of European Churches in Africa, Asia, or the Andean highlands than it is to speak of African, Asian, or Andean Churches. The causes that gave rise to the disgraceful histories of De Nobili and Ricci are still active today. If the Churches of the periphery are not capable of overcoming this oppressive control, then the inculturation of the faith⁴⁷ in non-western cultures will be impossible.

2.3.3. *An universal Church that is culturally polycentric*

If the Church makes its own this sign of cultural diversity, she will be reborn in

a new Pentecost as «the budding forth of the Kingdom» for our world. The Church's own cultural pluralism will show not only that the Gospel can be expressed through elements proper to very diverse cultures, but also, as Pedro Arrupe reminded us, that the Gospel possesses a dynamism which can make it into a normative, unifying principle that inspires, transforms, and recreates cultures, thus bringing about a new creation.

The Breath of God moves the Church toward appropriating cultural diversity, so that she can use it more effectively in the service of a global culture of fraternity. In this way the Church will contribute, more decisively than with all her social doctrine, to illuminating cultural ways which «keep telling us what is human» (J. Muguerza) in our shared life. Such cultural ways will be charged with the qualities of fraternity, recognition of mutual rights, and respect for and empowering of cultural diversity. The establishment of universal citizenship, once considered an old myth, has now become a question of survival for *all* humankind. The need for its realization would seem to make more urgent the recognition of cultural pluralism as a sign of God's Reign.

2.4. Democratic culture

The global economic crisis is making as clear as day the great threat that looms over democracy. The democratic system is in danger; there is a growing risk of its attenuation due to the market's impact. Blow by blow, the dictatorship of capitalism is destroying democracy,

even as it promotes a social fascism that criminalizes the poor and the “indignant” young people who are protesting in the streets. Every day we are greeted with news about political authorities in Europe who are setting policy out of «obedience due...» to the merchants.

In the midst of great uncertainty, the one thing certain is the need for change. As U. Beck recently declared to the press, «the world financial crisis is the Chernobyl of the neo-liberals, of all those who believe that the market fixes everything. There is need for something more, a vision of a different democracy, but such is not to be seen in the partisan debates. What is needed is not other institutions, but procedures that make it possible for the people to participate more...»⁴⁸.

The democratic system has never been recognized by the institutional Church as a sign of God's Reign, even though it has contributed tremendously to humanizing progress. Evidently democracy is seen as contaminated in its origins, but it is no more so than was the former regimen of autocratic rule by kings. Only with great difficulty has the ecclesiastical institution accepted democracy as a *de facto* reality with which it has to deal and within which it has to negotiate its quota of power.

Today more than ever there is an urgent need for the hierarchy to see democracy as a sign of God's Kingdom. The Church needs to take democracy to itself and recognize its culture of equality, freedom, and human rights as a partial anticipation of the utopia of God's Reign in history. Obviously, if the Church assumes the sign of democracy

as a way of life and an ecclesial quality, she will necessarily enter into processes of change which will transform her present historical figure, which in large part reflects the old autocratic regimen. Nevertheless, this change will be the best service it can provide to present-day democracies.

Our diminished democracies are seeking symbolic realities which will help them transcend and overcome their obtusely pragmatic objectives of utopian solidarity. A symbolic reality is one that is capable of provoking a desire for what is signified and of convoking people in a joint effort to build it and live it. Symbolic reality *provides food for thought* (P. Ricoeur), but it also *suggests things to do*. The ecclesiastical hierarchy should not be content with making calls for the moral regeneration of real democracies. The Church's role as «the initial budding forth of God's kingdom on earth» requires that she democratize her own structures and management methods in order to make present and visible to European citizens of today her role as a mystery of communion. Progress in that direction presupposes a greater condensation of her symbolic potential, so that there will be a better opportunity for her to become an ideal reference of a political project of *integral democracy*, one that will overcome the deficiencies of the participative model of our capitalist western democracies.

The Breath of God which promotes this change in the Catholic Church's direction is the same gentle breeze that supports and nourishes democracy. This is how G. Zagrebelsky sees it:

«The movement toward autocratic forms of government is not accidental. [...] It is part and parcel of all political conceptions based on truth and struggling against error. That is the way it has been for Catholicism. Only in the second half of the 20th century did a difficult debate make it possible for the Second Vatican Council to make a preferential option for democracy as the type of government most in accord with the equal dignity of all human beings as children of God [...]. The God who is compatible with democracy—who may even be its support and sustenance—is not the God who divides, the God who speaks in order to command and condemn; he is not a power who reigns in the world. Rather he is the God who appears in splendor to the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 K 19,11-13) in a dialogue brimming with respect and freedom: “And behold, Yahweh passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Yahweh, but Yahweh was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but Yahweh was not in earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but Yahweh was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle” as a sign of respect. He did not march off, lance at the ready, helmet lowered. When the Lord speaks to humans in this discreet way, what the psalm says is taken seriously: “God has spoken once; twice have I heard this” (Ps

62,12). The verse expresses the doubt or the worry that one has not understood well, but this is the existential condition of those who live by faith (for only those who believe in something can doubt). On the other hand, the pretension of some people –whatever their position in the society of believers– to enunciate absolute truths, substituting for the whispered word of God their own utterance, can appear to be almost blasphemy. And the passive obedience that is paid to their utterance can even appear to be idolatry.»⁴⁹

2.5. Final point

The Church's crisis of communication with society has placed her at a critical point, one that some people consider a

“point of no return”. The Church should not be perpetually suspicious of novelty, nor should she shield itself valiantly in the past in the face of the “winds of change” –these can never be fitting ecclesiastical attitudes if the Church hopes to emerge from her present quagmire. Such attitudes can never favor the sowing of the God's Gospel in the world.

The signs of the times are for the Church calls of the Spirit to open up new roads to the Reign of God. Reading and discerning the signs will be a fitting expression of her fidelity to the One who come by means of the Spirit of God. This will be the most sublime way to keep permanently open the dialogue of human beings with the God who calls us, for in such discernment the Church remains simultaneously in dialogue with humans and with God.

1. Cf. Dolores ALEIXANDRE, «De Elías a Juan de la Cruz. Un itinerario de silencio», en *Revista Catalana de Teología*, XXV (2000), pp. 191-201.
2. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Constituciones, Decretos y Declaraciones*, BAC, Madrid 1968, p. 9.
3. Cf. M. D. CHENU, «Los signos de la época», en AA., *La Iglesia en el mundo actual. Constitución «Gaudium et Spes»*. *Comentarios al Esquema XIII*, DDB, Bilbao 1968, pp. 95-102.
4. Besides the texts here transcribed, see also PO 9b; UR 4a; AA 14c.
5. «To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.» [GS 4]
6. «The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.» [GS 11]
7. «With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.» [GS 44a]
8. Cf. «La Iglesia católica-romana no es la verdadera Iglesia de Cristo», *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 83, May-August 2011, pp. 255-265.
9. Cf. J. I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *La autoridad de la verdad. Momentos oscuros del magisterio eclesialógico*, Barcelona, Herder 1996, pp. 189-223.
10. Cf. J. PEREA, «Disentir para reformar la Iglesia», *Iglesia Viva*, 2011/1, pp. 61-100.
11. Cf. Víctor CODINA, *Creo en el Espíritu Santo. Pneumatología narrativa*, Santander, Sal Terrae 1994, pp. 155-159.
12. RATZINGER, *Introducción al cristianismo*, Salamanca, Sígueme, pp. 293-294.
13. Cf. V. R. AZCUY, «El Espíritu y los signos de los tiempos. Legado, vigencia y porvenir de un discernimiento teológico», *Concilium* 342 (September 2011), p. 603.
14. Cf. J. COMBLIN, «Los signos de los tiempos», *Concilium* 312 (September 2005), p. 530.
15. Luis GONZÁLEZ-CARVAJAL. *Los signos de los tiempos. El Reino de Dios está entre nosotros...* Santander, Sal Terrae, 1987, p. 231.
16. J. COMBLIN, op. cit., p. 532.
17. The formula «Father/Head of the human family» is from J. D. CROSSAN, *Cuando oréis, decid: «Padre nuestro...»*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2011, pp. 43-69.
18. Open-eyed mysticism is suggested in Nm 24,4.16. The liturgical text of Monday of the third week of Advent translates the verses thus: «Oracle of the one who hears God's words, who contemplates visions of the Almighty, in ecstasy, with open eyes».
19. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-117.
20. Cf. J. MOLTSMANN, *La Iglesia, fuerza del Espíritu*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1978, pp. 232-233.
21. Cf. J. L. SEGUNDO, «Revelación, fe, signos de los tiempos», *Revista Latinoamericana* 14, May-August 1988, p. 139.
22. J. B. METZ, *Memoria passionis. Una evocación provocadora en una sociedad pluralista*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2007, p. 146.

23. Cf. op. cit., pp. 57-101; 232-234.
24. «La recepción del Vaticano II en Latinoamérica. El lugar teológico ‘la iglesia y los pobres’» in G. ALBERIGO-J. P. JOSSUA (eds.), *La recepción del Vaticano II*, Madrid, Cristiandad, 1987, pp. 213-214.
25. Cf. D. TRACY, *Pluralidad y ambigüedad. Hermenéutica, religión, esperanza*, Madrid, Trotta, 1997, p. 156, note 56.
26. Cf. Jon SOBRINO, *Jesucristo Liberador. Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret*, Madrid, Trotta, p. 330.
27. Cf. R. DÍAZ-SALAZAR, *Desigualdades internacionales. ¡Justicia ya!*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2011. The quote is on p. 5.
28. Because of the limited size of this booklet, I omit quantitative data about national and international inequalities. These can be found very easily.
29. Cf. T. RUSTER, *El Dios falsificado. Una nueva teología desde la ruptura entre cristianismo y religión*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 2011, pp. 13-14.
30. Cf. CROSSAN, o. cit. pp. 93-98.
31. F. MERNISSI, *Sueños en el umbral. Memoria de una niña del harén*, Barcelona, Muchnik, 1997, p. 217.
32. Cf. F. J. Vitoria CORMENZANA, «Al servicio de la fraternidad humana. Profecía y sabiduría de la tradición de Jesús de Nazaret», *Iglesia Viva* 244 (October-December 2010), pp. 83-100.
33. Cf. A. COMÍN I OLIVERES-L. GERVASONI I VILA (Coords.), *Democràcia econòmica. Vers una alternativa al capitalisme*, Barcelona, Catalunya segle XXI, 2009; B. BASTIDA, *Crisis, Crisis, ¿un final por escribir? Causas, consecuencias y salida a una crisis de sistema*, Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, Cuaderno 173, April 2011; V. NAVARRO, J. TORRES LÓPEZ and A. GARZÓN ESPINOSA, *Hay alternativas*, Madrid, Sequitur ATTAC, 2011.
34. J.C. MÈLICH, *Ética de la compasión*, Barcelona, Herder, 2010, p. 222.
35. Cf. J. D. CROSSAN, op. cit., pp. 143-168.
36. M. CASTELLS - M. SUBIRATS, *Mujeres y hombres: ¿Un amor imposible?*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2007, pp. 16-17.37. Cf. L. RAMÓN, *Mujeres de cuidado. Justicia, cuidado y transformación*, Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, Cuaderno 176, pág. 21-23. (*Women of Care. Justice, Care and Transformation*, Booklet 145)
38. Cf. J. I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *Otro mundo es posible... desde Jesús*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2010, pp. 137-186.
39. Cf., E. A. JOHNSON, *La que es. El misterio de de Dios en el discurso teológico feminista*, Barcelona, Herder, pp. 42-50.
40. Some interesting points about the universalization of the feminist cause can be found in L. RAMÓN, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
41. Cf. E. A. JOHNSON, op.cit., pp. 56-59.
42. Cf. E. SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *Cristología feminista crítica. Jesús, Hijo de Miriam, Profeta de la Sabiduría*, Madrid, Trotta, 2000, pp. 141-182.
43. Cf. L. RAMÓN, *Queremos el pan y las rosas. Emancipación de las mujeres y cristianismo*, Madrid, HOAC, 2011, pp. 150-151.
44. Cf. UNESCO, *Nuestra diversidad creativa. Informe de la Comisión Mundial de Cultura y Desarrollo*, Madrid, Fundación Santa María/SM, 1997, p. 9.
45. I. RAMONET, *Un mundo sin rumbo. Crisis de fin de siglo*, Madrid, Debate, 1997, p. 63.
46. Cf. A. PIERIS, «¿Universalidad del cristianismo?» in Cristianisme i Justícia, *Universalidad de Cristo. Universalidad del pobre. Aportación al diálogo interreligioso*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1995, p. 162.
47. Cf. A. TORRES QUEIRUGA, «Inculturación» in C. FLORISTÁN - J. J. TAMAYO, (eds.), *Conceptos fundamentales de Pastoral*, Madrid, Cristiandad, 1983; and in *idem*, *Conceptos fundamentales del cristianismo*, Madrid, Trotta, 1993, pp. 471-480 and 611- 619 respectively; P. SUESS, «Inculturación», in I. ELLACURÍA - J. SOBRINO (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación II*, Madrid, Trotta, 1990, pp. 377-422.
48. Cf. *El Correo*, 1/12/2011, p.38.
49. Cf. G. ZAGREBELSKY, *Contra la ética de la verdad*, Madrid, Trotta, 2010, pp. 138-139.

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