



The New Man Cometh: an ethical response to corruption in democracies

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It is a distinct honor to open this discussion on the effects of corruption on democracy in this international solidarity forum, and I most sincerely thank Anna Halpine and Ann Seabright, President-Founder and Chair of the Governing Board respectively of World Youth Alliance for it.

As this high-level conference is taking place on the eve of Pope John Paul II's first death anniversary, and is for the most part focused on his contributions to modern social thought, I should like to begin by asking the conference to join me in praying to John Paul the Great to help me deliver this lecture with clarity, and without any doctrinal error of any kind.

I have followed the work of World Youth Alliance from the very beginning, and on its seventh anniversary, one can only join those who have already spoken, notably the most notable George Weiel who pays such luminous tribute to Anna Halpine and the Alliance in the book *God's Choice*, his recent opus on Pope Benedict XVI.

No other organization of its kind – if, indeed, there are any other organizations of its kind – has in so short a time done so much to promote, particularly among the young people of the world, the dignity of the human person as the basis and focal point of every individual's life project. (I am, therefore, doubly honored to accept election to its International Board.)

The thought of coming here, especially at a time of great uncertainty for democracy in my country, was most certainly daunting. But nothing has prepared me for so distinguished a company and so stimulating an audience.

Democracy, in its various stages and forms, has a history of at least 2,500 years, since the Greeks first tried it. It continues to evolve. The democracy we know no more resembles the Athenian polity or the Roman republic than an electro-magnetic train resembles a horse-drawn carriage. The model we know arrived in the last century, when monarchy, aristocracy and oligarchy finally lost out to popular rule, when fascism and nazism were buried in the ashes of war, when Soviet communism finally collapsed – with no small help from John Paul the Great – under the unbearable weight of its false doctrine about man, and military dictatorships and one-party regimes fell into general disrepute from sheer corruption, incompetence and often-violent and cruel misuse of political power.

Democracy, as we know it, is a wonderful thing. So wonderful that even non-democracies want to be called by its name. Yet not every democracy is a city shining on a hill. So many of the 65 or so states that are called democracies have so little in common with the desired model, they sometimes look more like its antithesis or its caricature. All, of course, are trying their best. But in varying degrees, all suffer the same deformities.

Of these deformities, political corruption is concededly the most serious. *Transparency International* defines the term as "the abuse of entrusted power by political leaders for private gain." It includes bribery, extortion, fraud, illegal financial contributions to political parties, questionable favors or gratuities to secure public contracts, loans, licenses, subsidies, environmental clearances, land development and building permits, etc.

John Paul II's reference to it in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) provides a good starting point for our conversation. To him, political corruption seriously deforms because it simultaneously betrays moral principles and the norms of social justice; disturbs the correct functioning of the State; causes a strong distrust and weakening of public institutions; fosters disaffection with politics and politicians; and narrows down political choices to favor those who can influence those choices. It unduly provokes, one might add, the possible emergence of an authoritarian leader who could eventually create worse problems than he might be able to solve.

The financial cost is never small. But the larger cost is always in terms of its impact on the integrity of public institutions, on public morale and self-esteem, on the rule of law, and in the hardest of cases, on the rule of reason. The smallest act of political corruption, even when isolated, injures the moral and legal order. But corruption could become so pervasive as to become the norm. Then the rule of law completely breaks down, and that in turn causes far more massive and unchecked corruption. Unless the disorder is arrested and appropriate and timely reforms intervene, government, for all intents and purposes, goes under and in its place a band of brigands appears. Democracy is undermined.

Year after year, the Berlin-based NGO comes out with its Corruption Perception Index. Countries are rated, based on opinion surveys and independent analyses. Accuracy is not guaranteed, but it is generally assumed that no country is listed among the most corrupt from sheer inadvertence. The list gets far more publicity than the annual roll call of America's richest billionaires. But whether or not those so named do mind very much the negative publicity they are getting, they have not shown it by shedding off old skin. Not only does the corruption persist; in certain cases, it takes on the increased ferocity and magnitude of plunder.

According to World Bank Institute, quoting its own studies, more than trillion is paid in bribes each year, not counting embezzled public funds and stolen public assets. The figure is staggering, but those who have seen the corruption in some Third World countries may yet wonder if the estimate could not, in fact, be much bigger.

Whatever the reality, the situation in developing countries and countries in transition always looks worse than that in developed ones. This is usually because there, the practice of corruption is unusually primitive and unsophisticated and its immediate effects are quite obvious to all, except perhaps to the government agencies whose duty it is to curb and control corruption. In countries where politics appears to be the only thriving industry, the highest officials are often the richest while the people are the poorest, whatever their legitimate income.

Everywhere else, top business executives are better paid than top government officials. This is no mystery at all. After all, their job is to make the biggest profits for their firms, so they are paid according to their skills. Public officials, on the other hand, are there to serve the public interest; so income, while not unimportant, is at best only secondary. But what appears good in theory is not always so in practice. So Singapore pays its top officials the same amount of money that corporate executives of comparable qualifications earn, running a corporation or a successful professional practice. And Singaporeans tell us, this policy has paid off – in terms of honest and competent service, without any odor or wrongdoing.

Interested parties are always the first to suffer from corrupt official transactions. A qualified bidder, after having spent so much on technical and financial studies and lawyer's fees, could lose a completely winnable or even a "won" contract to an unqualified competitor, who was smart enough to pay a big bribe to a big official, even though the favored competitor may not be financially or technically capable to implement the contract. But in the end it is always the people that gets hit the hardest. If the contract is overpriced, the commodity or service of inferior quality, or the delivery is short or there is none at all, or the terms patently onerous, the consumers always bear the final burden while putting up with the poor or non-existent service.

The situation gets particularly malignant when those in power get out of control. In one Asian country, for instance, money meant for infrastructure, agricultural modernization, workers' welfare, education, healthcare, military and police institution-building, etc. is routinely re-channeled to in-season and out-of-season politicking. Corruption leaves little or nothing for development, not even for a reasonable response to the hypothetical threat posed by foreign-exported terrorism. Were such threat to become real, the nation would be at the mercy of an air force that cannot fly, a navy that will not float, an army that cannot move, communicate or shoot, and a police that cannot even go after motorized criminals.

In the same country, the Constitution mandates Congress to enact a budget each year – called the General Appropriation Act – to support government operations. Whenever Congress fails to do so, the expired budget is made to run again until the new one, if ever, is enacted. Each time this is done, everything on the old budget gets a second life of its own, including those programs and projects that had already been completed and paid for. As nobody is foolish enough to pay for any completed project twice, the reenacted amount thus becomes gravy for those in power.

Where corruption begins at the top, the logical consequence is the corruption of all the other layers and branches of government. Members of Congress are corrupted through a distorted pork barrel system, which allows them to pocket at least 40 percent of the cost of all projects. The judiciary is corrupted through the appointment system, which the President exercises without any concession to meritocracy or fear of the consequences of cronyism or favoritism. As soon as the two branches are corrupted, the rule of law also ceases to exist. Easy recourse to the courts and to honest public opinion is an illusion. Because those in power try to keep power at all costs, the electoral process and the general system of accountability, including impeachment of impeachable officers, are perverted, and the theft of public office becomes a larger crime than the usual theft in public office.

Today, Belarus is pictured as one country where someone not validly elected as taken over the government. This has provoked the strongest reaction from the United States. Yet, in another region there is at least this other country where the same situation has existed these last five years, without provoking the same concern from any member of G-8 or G-7. This is crucial because the corruption of the electoral process, as distinguished from other forms of political corruption, does not merely pose a danger to democracy; it destroys the very essence thereof. The international community should have a common standard in judging the legitimacy and fitness of corrupt political leaders everywhere. There cannot be one rule for some and another for others.

What then is to be done?

The problem is not only local or national, but global. Political corruption is now a transnational crime. It must be addressed adequately as such. Some countries have shown that corruption can be deterred. But there must be a willful and determined effort to put in those deterrents. These include: Cohesive political institutions with open decision-making; a highly professionalized bureaucracy committed to ignore and resist extralegal pressures or influence from any source; civic organizations with strong institutional links to relevant multilateral organizations; a social environment in which the press, the academe, the professions and civil society itself are committed to speaking out; a morally upright leadership that will always do what is right, whatever the consequence; a strong sense of the rule of law; and what John Rawls calls "a public conception of justice." The combination of all these implies a resolute desire and firm conviction on the part of both governors and governed to make democracy work.

Governments and multilateral institutions will have to work together to pursue an agreed program. For this purpose, it is absolutely necessary that the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which is a culmination of the various efforts of regional groupings of Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas to forge a common document, become the basic charter of global cooperation in fighting corruption. The looting of poor countries must be stopped; corrupt politicians' secret bank accounts abroad must be unlocked, the monies repatriated to benefit the people who are their real owners.

But this is just the beginning. So much needs to be done. We must realize that the fight is moral, not simply political. It is a struggle for the virtuous life, not simply for the most enjoyable one. At the center of it, is, and must be, the human person – man, and woman. What Abraham Lincoln called a government of the people, by the people, and for the people must begin with the human person, and the truth about man and woman. We cannot completely reject the corruption of our politics unless we first reject the corruption of the truth about ourselves. Political corruption corrupts our politics, but corruption of the truth about the human person corrupts the whole person, and his relationship with everybody else, including his Creator. We must insist on that truth, for without it, there can be no peace, justice, or freedom. And no democracy either.

"We need to ask ourselves," says John Paul in *Memory and Identity*, "what a democracy ought to be." "We cannot," says the great Pope in *Evangelium Vitae*, "idolize democracy to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally democracy is a 'system' and as such is a means and not an end. Its 'moral' value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to moral law." We cannot have a democracy in which political correctness censors or suppresses or shames out of existence that which is morally right and good and beautiful. Nor can we have it said that the purely materialistic society that atheistic materialism had failed to achieve has now become democracy's crowning glory or final triumph.

Democracy is not merely a political construct. It is above all a moral one. How men are to order their lives together is not a gift from the first philosophers or the last Congress; it is a gift that came down to us from the hand of God on Mount Sinai. It was the fruit of Yahweh's covenant with His people Israel. At Golgotha, the covenant was transformed into communion when the man who said He was the Son of God proved it by forgiving the sins of men, by dying and rising again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. It was not Christ entering into human history; it was human history entering into Christ. Christ thus became "the norm of history," as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it; we cannot, says John Paul, separate human history from Christ.

We must then live our lives in the full knowledge that our human journey begins and ends in God; and that our participation in civil government, passive or active, is nothing but a participation in the Divine governance of the universe. Man's vocation is eschatological, says John Paul, even though it leaves its mark upon the history of nations.

Upon the founding of this great American nation, the Founding Fathers spoke of "self-evident truths." No one had to tell them what these were. They knew that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Thus Alexis de Tocqueville could speak of religion as America's first political institution, and a contemporary commentator could talk of the "sacred canopy" under which America was built.

Much of this has blurred in the minds of many in our time. Freedom is now invoked by some to deny the very truth – the only truth – that makes men free. But freedom, says the

cardinal-theologian who would become Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Truth and Tolerance*, "is not an ever-loosening of norms and constant expression of individual freedoms in the direction of total liberation from all order. Freedom must relate to the truth, to what we actually are, and correspond to this nature of ours... Liberation consists not in gradually getting rid of law and of norms of behavior, but in purifying ourselves and purifying those norms, so that they make possible that coexistence of freedoms which is appropriate to man."

Not too long ago, Europe and Christianity were deemed interchangeable terms. 'Christenheit oder Europa' – the German poet could sing then. Today, no more than a few could seem to remember that the European heritage is preeminently Christian, that it was in a European sky that Constantine the Great saw the cross with the sign *in hoc signo vinces*, before he humbled the stronger Maxentius in the battle of Ponte de Milvio in the year 312, and that it was from Europe that the same cross of Christianity traveled across the seas to distant parts of the globe, including the Philippines. The deletion of Christianity from history means the deletion of God from human memory, and this, as C. S. Lewis warned, means the abolition of man.

With tremendous charity, some have called this rejection of the Lord of our history not apostasy but mere agnosticism. May I be allowed to wonder? Is it not rather amnesia, although perhaps a self-willed one? God gave us memory so we might smell roses even in the dead of winter, but somehow many seem to have trouble remembering where little Johnny came from. And they seem to regard this loss of memory the triumph of wisdom.

One is reminded of an old story by Anatole France. In that story a great and noble King wanted to know the wisdom of the ages before he dies. He sends out his scholars to kingdoms far and wide, and they return after many years, laden with volumes upon volumes of learned text. Yet on seeing these, the King says no, it's not another library he needs, but a page, a line, or maybe a word that sums up the wisdom of the ages. The scholars depart anew, and return only when the King is about to die. They hand him a small piece of paper. His eyes brighten up as he reads, and then he expires. On the paper the scholars have written: *Man is born, suffers, and dies.*

The great and noble King died savoring a lie.

The truth is much brighter than that – perhaps brighter than the light of the sun. Christ Himself told us: *Man is born, suffers, and dies, but he is born into eternal life.* The first Thomas doubted and then believed. The other Thomas sings it with boundless faith in his hymn to the Eucharist: *Credo quid dixit Dei Filius: Nil hoc verbo Veritatis verius – Nothing is more certain: The Son of God has told me so: What Truth has uttered, I believe and know.*"

Our present situation, says Romano Guardini in a book first published in English in 1956, twelve years before he died, requires not the single great genius, but a whole new human structure. We need a new man – and woman, one must assume. It took a particular type of man, one who was both creator and product of the Middle Ages, says Guardini, to

tame the chaos of the great migrations that lasted some five hundred years. After him came the man who unleashed the monstrous masses of power that threaten us even today. Our present hope, says Guardini, is that a new man would come who would put the true meaning of human life above the swirling currents of our time.

Twenty-five years ago, the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in his slim volume *After Virtue* wrote: "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us." He believed that if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we should be able to survive the next wave. He reminded us, however, that while the barbarians used to lie beyond the frontiers, they had since been governing us, without our being fully aware of it. "We are not waiting for a Godot," he said, "but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict."

Indeed, a new Benedict has come to guide the Church of Christ through a new dark age threatened by what the Pope himself has called the dictatorship of ethical relativism. He could well be the new man Guardini was talking about. But whether or not it is so, the world will need, more than ever, the moral imagination of the young to lift humanity from the deepening pessimism of a resurgent pre-Christian *Zeitgeist*. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the young men and women assembled here today, and all those who have been touched by their mission and message around the world will be leading the way to give back to the world the true meaning of faith, hope, and love.