



# European Humanist Federation

international non-profit association under Belgian law

## Fédération Humaniste Européenne

association internationale sans but lucratif de droit belge

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### VIEWS AT ODDS ON DEMOCRACY

OSCE and all its member states are committed to the rule of law. This means they are committed to democracy and to all that democracy comprises, first and foremost the democratic representation of the citizens. Since we are here to check the implementation of commitments (thanks, ODIHR) the European Humanist Federation wishes to draw your attention to a matter of serious concern for democrats: the erosion of the principle of democratic representation in some countries of Western Europe as well as in some European institutions.

Obviously, if democracy is not working as it should be it is because those we elect to uphold it fail to do so. MPs who pass laws and vote institutional documents are the first to be accountable for any loss of democratic content in governance. Moreover, it is difficult for citizens who rely mostly on the public media for their information to be aware of what is at stake because information on the subject of democracy is mostly inexistent. The case of Italy is emblematic in this sense.

In theory nobody questions the principle of democratic representation but in practice this principle is being surreptitiously eroded by giving undue access to public institutions to non-elected bodies like churches and by going as far as recognizing that religious institutions have the right to intervene in the law-making process. I used the word surreptitiously because there has been little or no public debate on the manner in which the role of churches - the Catholic Church in particular - has developed lately with respect to the public sphere. First the Catholic leaders claimed that they wanted to speak in public (which they have always done), then that they were political actors, then that the church had *institutional rights* (Pope Benedict). And in a way now it does. The Lisbon Treaty in its Art.16c has opened the door to

the possibility for churches to be consulted on bills which *they* consider to belong to their sphere of interest before they reach the European parliament.

According to the Vatican, which calls itself an expert in humanity, this sphere of interest is extremely extensive because the religious dimension embraces the whole range of human concerns and lends competence to the church in almost all matters. However, in actual practice, the views of the church hierarchy are more often than not at loggerheads not only with the views of people who don't care about religion (35 to 50% of Europeans) but even with those of the large majority who consider themselves Catholics but who do not follow church precepts especially in matters such as sexual and reproductive life. Those very matters on which the Church leaders seek to impose their moral doctrine on national and European norms. As late as last week Cardinal Bertone stated that there are "non-negotiable" principles, which "do not depend on the Church" but are based on human nature itself. How confusing! This is his view, a view to which he is entitled, which, however, is expressed in a language that is alien to politics and to our pluralist democracies. As is Pope Ratzinger's who writes "*Ethical relativism - which holds nothing as definitive - cannot be considered a condition for democracy*" (*Evangelium vitae*, No. 70). In other words, democracy does not work without God.

The point I wish to make and which is close to my heart is that by recognizing that religious institutions are political actors and, as such, have the right to intervene in the law-making process we change the very concept of representative democracy. Religious institutions do not represent their followers who do not elect their church hierarchy – unless you consider sufficient the election of the Pope by cardinals, but only if they are under eighty years of age.

Our parliaments comprise across the board believers and non-believers alike, Catholics as well as members of other religions or beliefs, thus representing all the citizenry. If on issues such as the beginning and end of human life, abortion, contraception, scientific research, Church representatives are consulted before bills reach parliament, elected MPs are defrauded of at least part of their representative capacity and parliament as such is defrauded of at least part of its function which is to find the common denominator that unites all the citizens of a given state. If Catholic MPs were to toe the Vatican line (were it only for fear of the punishments threatened by the Pope in this world or in the next) Catholic citizens would be represented twice and this would tilt the scales of democracy.

Church intervention in the law-making process is divisive and changes the very nature of representative democracy.

Vera Pegna

European Humanist Federation representative to OSCE