

VATICAN

Houses and properties: centralising Pope reverses doctrine

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Two recent speeches by Francis invite some reflection on a principle dear to the Social Doctrine of the Church, that of subsidiarity, and how it is understood in the Vatican administration in relation to its opposite, namely centralisation.

On 20 February last, with the motu proprio "Native Law" Francis established that the properties of entities and institutions pertaining to the Holy See are not to be understood as their private property, and managed as such, but as the property of the Holy See. The reason is indicated in the superiority of the principle of the universal destination of goods over that of private property, as attested by the Social Doctrine of the Church. While the ownership in the hands of the various ecclesiastical entities of the Holy See would be based on the primacy of private property, its concentration in the hands of the Holy See would guarantee the primacy of the universal destination of goods.

In the last few days, moreover, a new Rescript of the pope, which he confirmed on 13 February at an audience granted to the Secretary for the Economy, Caballero Ledo, has been made public, in which it is established that Vatican apartments will be granted to the cardinals by the owners on payment of rent on market terms, i.e. at "the same prices applicable to those who do not have offices in the Holy See", and any exceptions will have to be decided by the pope himself.

These measures are added to two others that, albeit from different spheres, seem to confirm the pope's current 'centralising' tendency: the reduction of the bishops' competence in authorising Mass in the ancient rite and the new organisational configuration of the diocese of Rome. What is surprising is the contrast of these provisions with what is happening in the doctrinal sphere of faith and morals, where the synodal process seems instead to take competences away from the centre to grant them to the periphery, to the point of calling into question the very nature of the Church and its hierarchy of roles.

To return to the principle of subsidiarity: the pope does not seem to want to respect it in certain organisational and economic spheres, while he seems intent on applying it in fields of greater relevance to the profound nature of the Church. One wonders: shouldn't this be the other way round?

Distinguished canonists in the past have made it clear that the principle of subsidiarity, which since Paragraph 80 of *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) the Church has applied to society and politics, is not applicable to the Church itself, understood in its

mystery and in its profound reality established by Christ and animated by the Spirit. The universal Church has primacy over the various articulations of the local Church and individual Christians. While in civil society the family and the social and territorial intermediate bodies come first, followed by the central political power; in the Church the reverse happens: it is not Christians who make the Church but it is the Church that makes Christians. It is not the branches that make the vine, joining together, but it is the vine that makes the branches. It is not we who have chosen Christ, but it is Christ who has chosen us. In contrast to this vision, and in deference to a principle of subsidiarity that is perhaps not well conceived, there are plans today to delegate competences proper to the universal Church and the Supreme Pontiff to continental, national, or diocesan synods, to confer doctrinal definition tasks to episcopal conferences, and in the future to connect to the bishop a permanent synod composed of priests and lay people with decision-making tasks. With the principle of subsidiarity, one would like to change the structure of the Church from 'monarchical' to 'democratic'.

At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity is not applied in ordinary, administrative, and economic management, where it could be, since the Vatican also has needs of its own. In these areas, the Social Doctrine of the Church has never looked favourably on centralisation. The latest decisions taken by Francis in this regard may have reasons we do not know. For example, they may be due to having to cope with a difficult economic or financial situation, although they do not seem to be a solution on this front: how can the income from the rent of apartments to cardinals contribute to this disproportionate purpose?

The fact remains, however, that at least it is not far-fetched to understand the private property in the hands of the ecclesiastical entities belonging to the Holy See as subsidiary to the universal destination of property that would only be guaranteed by the ownership of property in the hands of the Holy See. The two principles of ownership and universal destination are on the same plane and it is not correct to consider the first as subordinate to the second. I am well aware that certain passages of the social encyclicals can be read in this way, but others complete the picture, affirming that God has given goods to all so that they may be put to use and not simply used in a promiscuous manner. And work recalls ownership, without which no good is a resource.