
Mattarella: "Let us all work towards ensuring that there are no 'democracy-illiterates'"

(Trieste) "Ensuring that there are no 'democracy-illiterates' is a fundamental, noble cause that concerns us all. Not just those who are in a position of responsibility or power". This message was contained in the keynote speech of the President of the Italian Republic, **Sergio Mattarella**, on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the 50th Social Week of Catholics in Italy, which began this afternoon at the GCC - Generali Convention Centre in Trieste. The Head of State delivered a true "Lectio Magistralis" on democracy and participation, the main themes of the event in Trieste, ongoing until Sunday 7 July, when it will be concluded by Pope Francis. The Italian President observed that the "challenging theme of democracy, which is the focus of the Social Week reflections", is a topic that "engages everyone." He proceeded to illustrate to the over 1,000 delegates the rationale behind this assertion, based on the premise that "democracy" is a "commonly used word, even in its use as an adjective". In his nearly 33-minute speech, which was interrupted several times by enthusiastic rounds of applause from the audience, the president pointed out: "Democracy is not limited to its operational regulations, despite the indispensable definition of and respect for the "rules of the game." Furthermore, "the exercise of democracy is not reduced to a mere procedural aspect, nor is it accomplished merely via the inalienable exercise of the vote at the ballot box during elections." "In fact, democracy is embedded in people's daily lives and in the mutual respect of social relations, in the ever-changing historical circumstances, without this ever leading to submissive attitudes regarding its quality," observed the Head of State. He then posed the question: "Is it possible to be content with democracy being imperfect? To be content with a 'low-intensity' democracy?" Is it feasible to concede, in a pragmatic manner, to the growing disengagement of citizens from matters pertaining to the public domain? Can a democracy truly exist without the consistent exercise of the voters' role?" "It is imperative to reflect on the phenomenon of citizens' defection, abstention, and renunciation of voting in recent elections", Mattarella pointed out. He thus highlighted the need for

“a cautious approach to avoid conflating partisanship with participation.”

Mattarella referred to "imperfect democracies" where "freedoms become vulnerable". This "is made manifest" when "low voter turnout" occurs. Or where the 'one-man-one-vote' principle is distorted via mechanisms that alter the voters' representativeness and intentions. Furthermore, freedoms would be even more vulnerable if democracies were to be enfeebled and disempowered by illiberal tendencies." For the Head of State, it is imperative that "concrete efforts be made to ensure that each citizen is able to fully participate in the life of the Republic." The President warned that "rights are realised through the exercise of democracy", and that a democracy "of the majority" would be, by definition, an irreconcilable contradiction, given the confusion between the governing instruments and the protection of the effective condition of rights and freedoms." At the core of democracy are the people, their relationships and the communities they create, the civil, social and economic entities that arise from their freedom, aspirations and humanity. This is the cornerstone of our Constitution."

Democracy is never conquered once and for all,

Mattarella affirmed, underscoring the "unprecedented critical challenges", we are confronted with today. "Our societies are increasingly resembling societies of risks, which are sometimes tackled with technocratic solutions," the President warned. The answer to the question 'What is the purpose of democracy?' is therefore to be found in Article 2 of our Constitution: "To recognise and guarantee the freedoms of individuals and communities". That this commitment must be constantly renewed is demonstrated by the fact that "Democracy as a form of government is not sufficient to ensure the full

protection of rights and freedoms: it can be distorted and violated under the pretext of serving a greater good or common good. The 20th century reminds us of this and serves as a warning". But our present time is also alarming, because "war suffocates democracy, it can suffocate it". In Trieste, a border city, the Head of State reiterated today that "There is a need to build a solid European sovereignty that integrates and gives concrete and not illusory meaning to the sovereignty of the Member States. A sovereignty that empowers and strengthens the sovereignty of the people, as enshrined in our constitutions and reflected, at the level of the Community institutions, in the European Parliament". This is also why "the preservation and progress of our legal structures in the service of freedom, equality, solidarity and peace depend on a stronger and more effective European unity - stronger and more effective than we have been able to achieve so far".

"Democracy is the antidote to war,

said the President, and that is why "we need to look and pay attention to what is happening around us in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. In addition to the re-emergence of neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist tendencies, new geopolitical changes are also being driven by the growth rates of previously less developed Continent-States, by territorial, ethnic and religious tensions that often erupt into tragic wars, by demographic trends and large-scale migratory flows. We are faced with phenomena - these and others - that are radically altering the living conditions of the past, and under no circumstances can we delude ourselves into thinking that they will ever return." "By definition,

democracy is a bottom-up process, linked to community life, because democracy is about walking together,"

the President concluded, expressing the hope that "there will be many of us walking this path together".

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