

A crisis of truth in France. Catholics' potential role



After the first round of the legislative elections, in which the candidates of the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party took the lead in most electoral districts by a landslide, many French citizens feared that this rising tide would give the RN an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly, i.e. more than 289 elected deputies, thereby dooming our country to a system of "illiberal democracy" for a long time to come. This was not the case. The RN party and its allies won a total of 143 seats, well short of the predictions made between the first and second rounds, and were defeated by the president's party, Ensemble, with 168 seats, which "saved the day" in spite of a heavy loss of about a hundred seats, and by the left-wing coalition, Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP). Although hastily put together, this coalition won 182 seats. It was formed on the basis of a programme that was in many ways radical in economic and social terms, a 'rupturist' agenda that sought to address a deep-seated desire for "social and environmental justice". The logic of the 'Republican Front' - to do everything possible to ensure the election of the strongest candidates in the second round in order to defeat the Rassemblement National candidate in each constituency - proved successful. This led to a reciprocal game of third-placed candidates withdrawing from the race, even among very diverse political groups, ultimately winning over voters of the traditional French Right, Centrist and Left camps. This allowed 'Republican' France to breathe a sigh of relief and marked the dawn of an unprecedented era of political governance for the Fifth Republic. After the installation of what will undoubtedly be a *very provisional* interim government for the duration of the Olympic Games, the President of the Republic will have to appoint a new Prime Minister from the ranks of the parliamentary majority, the New Popular Front, who will then form a cabinet with this coalition. The process could be even quicker if the NFP were to come to an agreement on the choice of a prime minister as early as this week. Given that the incumbent National Assembly cannot be dissolved for a year, the left-wing coalition will have to pursue a "social, economic and European course." This will require compromises with centrist forces, which is bound to be difficult, given that it's not embedded in French political culture. But the circumstances force us to be innovative, otherwise we risk proving to the far right that it is the only one capable of governing

the country. Besides this succinct analysis, hopefully as unbiased as possible, as Christians we need to step back a little from our judgement and self-criticism. How did we get here? How is it that the far-right, with its deeply-rooted beliefs that are at odds with the free and fraternal society proposed by Pope Francis, has managed to win over such a wide spectrum of fellow citizens, including Catholic sympathisers and believers, in the space of 30 years, from one presidential election to the next? Following the first round of the legislative elections, Dominique Quinio (former director of La Croix and president of the Social Weeks of French Catholics, *Ed.'s note*) observed that our institutions, notably political parties, have demonstrated a lack of responsiveness to the concrete difficulties faced by our middle-class fellow citizens. The crisis of the "Yellow Vests" ought to have served as an early warning about the inward-looking tendency of the political class. It can be argued that a crisis of political representation exists, whereby large numbers of voters feel that they are not 'represented' or duly considered. Sociologists have described this phenomenon as 'social invisibility'. However, it is important to note that numerous factors have contributed to the erosion of confidence in French institutions, which has occurred independently of the political system itself. Time and again, the education system, public health services and local authorities, in particular, have been vilified in various ways, while the news media, including mainstream media, have rekindled diffidence, a trait that French citizens are particularly adept at cultivating. Let us now turn our attention from the news media to the realm of mediation and the role of intermediary bodies. Catholic wisdom posits that intermediary bodies facilitate participation in the common good and instruct on its development. These intermediate social bodies have not disappeared; they continue to exist in the form of sporting and charitable associations, grassroots education movements, the various trade unions, and the Churches and religious communities. Despite clear signs of decline, these institutions remain very much present, and fortunately so. Yet the educational task of these bodies is undoubtedly made more difficult by what I would describe as a crisis of truth and common sense. In his 2009 encyclical 'Caritas in veritate', a thought-provoking and arguably misinterpreted text, Pope Benedict XVI identified a crisis of truth characteristic of democratic systems. He argued that the abandonment of the concept of a shared Truth to be sought collectively has given rise to both relativism, which undermines all forms of authority, and populism, which entrusts a minority with the task of determining what is good and what is bad. These considerations prompt me to applaud the prudent attitude of the French Catholic episcopate in its recent pre-election statements, which called for freedom of discernment, rather than brandishing entirely inappropriate arguments on authority in a context of crisis of confidence. If Christians are to play a role in this critical moment in France, it must be in their contribution to restoring an atmosphere of mutual listening, of respect for designated leadership, of subtlety in the debates surrounding the very complex issues of social justice, immigration and integration. Their role thus consists in promoting participation in intermediate social bodies and in national or local public life, since – in retrospect - these entail the assumption of risk. This commitment is grounded in Christian hope, which does not imply that matters will resolve themselves, via divine intervention. Rather, it means to never lose hope in one's intrinsic capacity to pursue the truth and the significance of belonging to a community. ___

*honorary president of the Social Weeks of France

Jérôme Vignon*