

## Multilateralism and national sovereignty

Since the creation of the *League of Nations*, the desire for peace has led to great hopes for multilateralism to preserve humanity from a new world war. At the same time, it has constantly come up against theoretical criticism and practical obstacles. In the absence of real, effective and indisputable global governance, the only possibility left is a contractual one, whereby States freely oblige themselves, in the eyes of all others, to assume the conventions, treaties and contracts they sign.

Even if not everything that is signed is ratified or executed, experience shows that it is still preferable for a State to make a commitment in the presence of others rather than to recognize no obstacle to its action. The protection and promotion of human rights can thus expect a great deal from multilateralism: the views of other States and NGOs limit the omnipotence and impunity of totalitarianism.

But it is no less true that solidarity between the latter in turn limits multilateralism: it suffices to appeal against respect for human rights to respect for the sovereignty of States, their culture, their national security, etc. The Human Rights Council, in Geneva, is the usual theatre of these jousts, where fixed postures not lacking in verbal aggression can both compromise and guarantee international political balances.

It seems that we are faced with the dilemma of either powerful multilateralism that impinges on state sovereignty or of state sovereignties powerful enough to reduce multilateralism to impotence. The major climate conferences are a current example that shows the weakness of multilateralism when it comes to dealing quickly and concretely with issues that affect us all, such as climate change. The unilateral measures of border closures taken by some States during the growth of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the criticisms directed at WHO in the early stages of crisis management, have also damaged the credibility of multilateralism, even if the criticism also indirectly pays tribute to it: regretting that multilateralism has not lived up to the expectations placed on it may well lead to a desire to strengthen it so that it will be more effective in the future.

At the opening of the 43rd regular session of the Human Rights Council, UN Secretary General António Guterres said: « Sovereignty remains a fundamental principle of international relations. But national sovereignty cannot be a pretext for violating human rights. We must overcome the false dichotomy between human rights and national sovereignty. Human rights and national sovereignty go hand in hand. The promotion of human rights strengthens States and societies, thereby enhancing sovereignty. (...) Multilateralism needs to be more inclusive, be more networked and articulate around human rights. »

The need for multilateralism is particularly notable in the area of human rights. When a State violates the rights of its own citizens, the denunciation of these facts by civil society organizations is undoubtedly necessary, but it can be limited by pressure from the State in question and it is important that the State be accountable for its actions to the community of Nations. If the latter succeeded in formulating, at the 2005 UN General Assembly, a common responsibility to protect any citizen whose rights are violated, the accused state usually objects

to interference in the affairs of a sovereign state.

The theme is therefore highly topical. The question may therefore be asked: how can we prevent the necessary respect for the sovereignty of States from being used against multilateralism, thus reducing the UN's action to impotence?

Consequently, an investigation, using our own intellectual resources, of the following questions is proposed:

1. Has the Catholic Church, especially in its social thought but perhaps also in ecclesiology, assumed this tension between multilateralism and sovereignty? Is there an anteriority or priority of one of these notions over the other? Is there a Catholic specificity in this matter in relation to other Christian confessions?
2. Sovereignty is a concept of political philosophy that has been theorized (notably by Jean Bodin). Does multilateralism enjoy such a status or is it essentially historical and pragmatic?
3. Does the Dominican tradition have something specific to bring to this debate?
4. How can the limits to sovereignty be characterized? Who determines, recognizes or creates them? How do they vary?
5. Assuming that multilateralism and sovereignty are inversely proportional, who is to arbitrate the place of the cursor separating their domains?
6. Are criticisms of multilateralism cyclical or do they point to an intrinsic weakness? Consequently, should efforts be made to reform, increase or replace it?
7. Is the tension between multilateralism and sovereignty real and inescapable or is it only an alibi of bad faith of States that advocate human rights outside to better violate them at home?