

DOCTRINAL NOTE ON SOME QUESTIONS REGARDING

THE PARTICIPATION OF CATHOLICS IN POLITICAL LIFE

*The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, having received the opinion of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, has decided that it would be appropriate to publish the present **Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life**. This Note is directed to the Bishops of the Catholic Church and, in a particular way, to Catholic politicians and all lay members of the faithful called to participate in the political life of democratic societies.*

I. A constant teaching

1. The commitment of Christians in the world has found a variety of expressions in the course of the past 2000 years. One such expression has been Christian involvement in political life: Christians, as one Early Church writer stated, «play their full role as citizens».^[1] Among the saints, the Church venerates many men and women who served God through their generous commitment to politics and government. Among these, Saint Thomas More, who was proclaimed Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, gave witness by his martyrdom to «the inalienable dignity of the human conscience».^[2] Though subjected to various forms of psychological pressure, Saint Thomas More refused to compromise, never forsaking the «constant fidelity to legitimate authority and institutions» which distinguished him; he taught by his life and his death that «man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality».^[3]

It is commendable that in today's democratic societies, in a climate of true freedom, everyone is made a participant in directing the body politic.^[4] Such societies call for new and fuller forms of participation in public life by Christian and non-Christian citizens alike. Indeed, all can contribute, by voting in elections for lawmakers and government officials, and in other ways as well, to the development of political solutions and legislative choices which, in their opinion, will benefit the common good.^[5] The life of a democracy could not be productive without the active, responsible and generous involvement of everyone, «albeit in a diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks, and responsibilities».^[6]

By fulfilling their civic duties, «guided by a Christian conscience»,^[7] in conformity with its values, the lay faithful exercise their proper task of infusing the temporal order with Christian values, all the while respecting the nature and rightful autonomy of that order,^[8] and cooperating with other citizens according to their particular competence and responsibility.^[9] The consequence of this fundamental teaching of the Second Vatican Council is that «the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good».^[10] This would include the promotion and defence of goods such as public order and peace, freedom and equality, respect for human life and for the environment, justice and solidarity.

The present *Note* does not seek to set out the entire teaching of the Church on this matter, which is summarized in its essentials in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but intends only to recall some principles proper to the Christian conscience, which inspire the social and political involvement of Catholics in democratic societies.^[11] The emergence of ambiguities or questionable positions in recent times, often because of the pressure of world events, has made it necessary to clarify some important elements of Church teaching in this area.

II. Central points in the current cultural and political debate

2. Civil society today is undergoing a complex cultural process as the end of an era brings with it a time of uncertainty in the face of something new. The great strides made in our time give evidence of humanity's progress in attaining conditions of life which are more in keeping with human dignity. The growth in the sense of responsibility towards countries still on the path of development is without doubt an important sign, illustrative of a greater sensitivity to the common good. At the same time, however, one cannot close one's eyes to the real dangers which certain tendencies in society are promoting through legislation, nor can one ignore the effects this will have on future generations.

A kind of cultural relativism exists today, evident in the conceptualization and defence of an ethical pluralism, which sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principles of the natural moral law. Furthermore, it is not unusual to hear the opinion expressed in the public sphere that such ethical pluralism is the very condition for democracy.^[12] As a result, citizens claim complete autonomy with regard to their moral choices, and lawmakers maintain that they are respecting this freedom of choice by enacting laws which ignore the principles of natural ethics and yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends,^[13] as if every possible outlook on life were of equal value. At the same time, the value of tolerance is disingenuously invoked when a large number of citizens, Catholics among them, are asked not to base their contribution to society and political life – through the legitimate means available to everyone in a democracy – on their particular understanding of the human person and the common good. The history of the twentieth century demonstrates that those citizens were right who recognized the falsehood of relativism, and with it, the notion that there is no moral law rooted in the nature of the human person, which must govern our understanding of man, the common good and the state.

3. Such relativism, of course, has nothing to do with the legitimate freedom of Catholic citizens to choose among the various political opinions that are compatible with faith and the natural moral law, and to select, according to their own criteria, what best corresponds to the needs of the common good. Political freedom is not – and cannot be – based upon the relativistic idea that all conceptions of the human person's good have the same value and truth, but rather, on the fact that politics are concerned with very concrete realizations of the true human and social good in given historical, geographic, economic, technological and cultural contexts. From the specificity of the task at hand and the variety of circumstances, a plurality of morally acceptable policies and solutions arises. It is not the Church's task to set forth specific political solutions – and even less to propose a single solution as the acceptable one – to temporal questions that God has left to the free and responsible judgment of each person. It is, however, the Church's right and duty to

provide a moral judgment on temporal matters when this is required by faith or the moral law.^[14] If Christians must «recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view about the organization of worldly affairs»,^[15] they are also called to reject, as injurious to democratic life, a conception of pluralism that reflects moral relativism. Democracy must be based on the true and solid foundation of non-negotiable ethical principles, which are the underpinning of life in society.

On the level of concrete political action, there can generally be a plurality of political parties in which Catholics may exercise – especially through legislative assemblies – their right and duty to contribute to the public life of their country.^[16] This arises because of the contingent nature of certain choices regarding the ordering of society, the variety of strategies available for accomplishing or guaranteeing the same fundamental value, the possibility of different interpretations of the basic principles of political theory, and the technical complexity of many political problems. It should not be confused, however, with an ambiguous pluralism in the choice of moral principles or essential values. The legitimate plurality of temporal options is at the origin of the commitment of Catholics to politics and relates directly to Christian moral and social teaching. It is in the light of this teaching that lay Catholics must assess their participation in political life so as to be sure that it is marked by a coherent responsibility for temporal reality.

The Church recognizes that while democracy is the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices, it succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human *person*.^[17] Catholic involvement in political life cannot compromise on this principle, for otherwise the witness of the Christian faith in the world, as well as the unity and interior coherence of the faithful, would be non-existent. The democratic structures on which the modern state is based would be quite fragile were its foundation not the centrality of the human person. It is respect for the person that makes democratic participation possible. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the protection of «the rights of the person is, indeed, a necessary condition for citizens, individually and collectively, to play an active part in public life and administration».^[18]

4. The complex array of today's problems branches out from here, including some never faced by past generations. Scientific progress has resulted in advances that are unsettling for the consciences of men and women and call for solutions that respect ethical principles in a coherent and fundamental way. At the same time, legislative proposals are put forward which, heedless of the consequences for the existence and future of human beings with regard to the formation of culture and social behaviour, attack the very inviolability of human life. Catholics, in this difficult situation, have the right and the duty to recall society to a deeper understanding of human life and to the responsibility of everyone in this regard. John Paul II, continuing the constant teaching of the Church, has reiterated many times that those who are directly involved in lawmaking bodies have a «grave and clear obligation to oppose» any law that attacks human life. For them, as for every Catholic, it is impossible to promote such laws or to vote for them.^[19] As John Paul II has taught in his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae* regarding the situation in which it is not possible to overturn or completely repeal a law allowing abortion which is already in force or coming up for a vote, «an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at

limiting the harm done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality».^[20]

In this context, it must be noted also that a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals. The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good. Nor can a Catholic think of delegating his Christian responsibility to others; rather, the Gospel of Jesus Christ gives him this task, so that the truth about man and the world might be proclaimed and put into action.

When political activity comes up against moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise or derogation, the Catholic commitment becomes more evident and laden with responsibility. In the face of *fundamental and inalienable ethical demands*, Christians must recognize that what is at stake is the essence of the moral law, which concerns the integral good of the human person. This is the case with laws concerning *abortion* and *euthanasia* (not to be confused with the decision to forgo *extraordinary treatments*, which is morally legitimate). Such laws must defend the basic right to life from conception to natural death. In the same way, it is necessary to recall the duty to respect and protect the rights of the *human embryo*. Analogously, the *family* needs to be safeguarded and promoted, based on monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, and protected in its unity and stability in the face of modern laws on divorce: in no way can other forms of cohabitation be placed on the same level as marriage, nor can they receive legal recognition as such. The same is true for the freedom of parents regarding the *education* of their children; it is an inalienable right recognized also by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In the same way, one must consider *society's protection of minors* and freedom from *modern forms of slavery* (drug abuse and prostitution, for example). In addition, there is the right to *religious freedom* and the development of an *economy* that is at the service of the human person and of the common good, with respect for social justice, the principles of human solidarity and subsidiarity, according to which «the rights of all individuals, families, and organizations and their practical implementation must be acknowledged».^[21] Finally, the question of *peace* must be mentioned. Certain pacifistic and ideological visions tend at times to secularize the value of peace, while, in other cases, there is the problem of summary ethical judgments which forget the complexity of the issues involved. Peace is always «the work of justice and the effect of charity».^[22] It demands the absolute and radical rejection of violence and terrorism and requires a constant and vigilant commitment on the part of all political leaders.

III. Principles of Catholic doctrine on the autonomy of the temporal order and on pluralism.

5. While a plurality of methodologies reflective of different sensibilities and cultures can be legitimate in approaching such questions, no Catholic can appeal to the principle of pluralism or to the autonomy of lay involvement in political life to support policies affecting the common good which compromise or undermine fundamental ethical requirements. This is not a question of «confessional values» *per se*, because such ethical precepts are rooted in human nature itself

and belong to the natural moral law. They do not require from those who defend them the profession of the Christian faith, although the Church's teaching confirms and defends them always and everywhere as part of her service to the truth about man and about the common good of civil society. Moreover, it cannot be denied that politics must refer to principles of absolute value precisely because these are at the service of the dignity of the human person and of true human progress.

6. The appeal often made to «*the rightful autonomy of the participation of lay Catholics*» in politics needs to be clarified. Promoting the common good of society, according to one's conscience, has nothing to do with «confessionalism» or religious intolerance. For Catholic moral doctrine, the rightful autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church – *but not from that of morality* – is a value that has been attained and recognized by the Catholic Church and belongs to inheritance of contemporary civilization.^[23] John Paul II has warned many times of the dangers which follow from confusion between the religious and political spheres. «Extremely sensitive situations arise when a specifically religious norm becomes or tends to become the law of a state without due consideration for the distinction between the domains proper to religion and to political society. In practice, the identification of religious law with civil law can stifle religious freedom, even going so far as to restrict or deny other inalienable human rights».^[24] All the faithful are well aware that specifically religious activities (such as the profession of faith, worship, administration of sacraments, theological doctrines, interchange between religious authorities and the members of religions) are outside the state's responsibility. The state must not interfere, nor in any way require or prohibit these activities, except when it is a question of public order. The recognition of civil and political rights, as well as the allocation of public services may not be made dependent upon citizens' religious convictions or activities.

The right and duty of Catholics and all citizens to seek the truth with sincerity and to promote and defend, by legitimate means, moral truths concerning society, justice, freedom, respect for human life and the other rights of the person, is something quite different. The fact that some of these truths may also be taught by the Church does not lessen the political legitimacy or the rightful «autonomy» of the contribution of those citizens who are committed to them, irrespective of the role that reasoned inquiry or confirmation by the Christian faith may have played in recognizing such truths. Such «autonomy» refers first of all to the attitude of the person who respects the truths that derive from natural knowledge regarding man's life in society, even if such truths may also be taught by a specific religion, because truth is one. It would be a mistake to confuse the proper *autonomy* exercised by Catholics in political life with the claim of a principle that prescinds from the moral and social teaching of the Church.

By its interventions in this area, the Church's Magisterium does not wish to exercise political power or eliminate the freedom of opinion of Catholics regarding contingent questions. Instead, it intends – as is its proper function – to instruct and illuminate the consciences of the faithful, particularly those involved in political life, so that their actions may always serve the integral promotion of the human person and the common good. The social doctrine of the Church is not an intrusion into the government of individual countries. It is a question of the lay Catholic's duty to be morally coherent, found within one's conscience, which is one and indivisible. «There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual life', with

its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called ‘secular’ life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social responsibilities, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. The branch, engrafted to the vine which is Christ, bears its fruit in every sphere of existence and activity. In fact, every area of the lay faithful’s lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the ‘places in time’ where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service of others. Every activity, every situation, every precise responsibility – as, for example, skill and solidarity in work, love and dedication in the family and the education of children, service to society and public life and the promotion of truth in the area of culture – are the occasions ordained by providence for a ‘continuous exercise of faith, hope and charity’ (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 4)». ^[25] Living and acting in conformity with one’s own conscience on questions of politics is not slavish acceptance of positions alien to politics or some kind of confessionalism, but rather the way in which Christians offer their concrete contribution so that, through political life, society will become more just and more consistent with the dignity of the human person.

In democratic societies, all proposals are freely discussed and examined. Those who, on the basis of respect for individual conscience, would view the moral duty of Christians to act according to their conscience as something that disqualifies them from political life, denying the legitimacy of their political involvement following from their convictions about the common good, would be guilty of a form of intolerant *secularism*. Such a position would seek to deny not only any engagement of Christianity in public or political life, but even the possibility of natural ethics itself. Were this the case, the road would be open to moral anarchy, which would be anything but legitimate pluralism. The oppression of the weak by the strong would be the obvious consequence. The marginalization of Christianity, moreover, would not bode well for the future of society or for consensus among peoples; indeed, it would threaten the very spiritual and cultural foundations of civilization. ^[26]

IV. Considerations regarding particular aspects

7. In recent years, there have been cases within some organizations founded on Catholic principles, in which support has been given to political forces or movements with positions contrary to the moral and social teaching of the Church on fundamental ethical questions. Such activities, in contradiction to basic principles of Christian conscience, are not compatible with membership in organizations or associations which define themselves as Catholic. Similarly, some Catholic periodicals in certain countries have expressed perspectives on political choices that have been ambiguous or incorrect, by misinterpreting the idea of the political autonomy enjoyed by Catholics and by not taking into consideration the principles mentioned above.

Faith in Jesus Christ, who is «the way, the truth, and the life» (*Jn 14:6*), calls Christians to exert a greater effort in building a culture which, inspired by the Gospel, will reclaim the values and contents of the Catholic Tradition. The presentation of the fruits of the spiritual, intellectual and moral heritage of Catholicism in terms understandable to modern culture is a task of great urgency today, in order to avoid also a kind of Catholic cultural diaspora. Furthermore, the cultural achievements and mature experience of Catholics in political life in various countries,

especially since the Second World War, do not permit any kind of ‘inferiority complex’ in comparison with political programs which recent history has revealed to be weak or totally ruinous. It is insufficient and reductive to think that the commitment of Catholics in society can be limited to a simple transformation of structures, because if at the basic level there is no culture capable of receiving, justifying and putting into practice positions deriving from faith and morals, the changes will always rest on a weak foundation.

Christian faith has never presumed to impose a rigid framework on social and political questions, conscious that the historical dimension requires men and women to live in imperfect situations, which are also susceptible to rapid change. For this reason, Christians must reject political positions and activities inspired by a utopian perspective which, turning the tradition of Biblical faith into a kind of prophetic vision without God, makes ill use of religion by directing consciences towards a hope which is merely earthly and which empties or reinterprets the Christian striving towards eternal life.

At the same time, the Church teaches that authentic freedom does not exist without the truth. «Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery».^[27] In a society in which truth is neither mentioned nor sought, every form of authentic exercise of freedom will be weakened, opening the way to libertine and individualistic distortions and undermining the protection of the good of the human person and of the entire society.

8. In this regard, it is helpful to recall a truth which today is often not perceived or formulated correctly in public opinion: the right to freedom of conscience and, in a special way, to religious freedom, taught in the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae* of the Second Vatican Council, is based on the ontological dignity of the human person and not on a non-existent equality among religions or cultural systems of human creation.^[28] Reflecting on this question, Paul VI taught that «in no way does the Council base this right to religious freedom on the fact that all religions and all teachings, including those that are erroneous, would have more or less equal value; it is based rather on the dignity of the human person, which demands that he not be subjected to external limitations which tend to constrain the conscience in its search for the true religion or in adhering to it».^[29] The teaching on freedom of conscience and on religious freedom does not therefore contradict the condemnation of indifferentism and religious relativism by Catholic doctrine;^[30] on the contrary, it is fully in accord with it.

V. Conclusion

9. The principles contained in the present *Note* are intended to shed light on one of the most important aspects of the unity of Christian life: coherence between faith and life, Gospel and culture, as recalled by the Second Vatican Council. The Council exhorted Christians «to fulfill their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that, because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that by our faith we are bound all the more to fulfill these responsibilities according to the vocation of each... May Christians...be proud of the opportunity to carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional,

scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God».^[311]

The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, in the Audience of November 21, 2002, approved the present Note, adopted in the Plenary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, November 24, 2002, the Solemnity of Christ the King.

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^[11] *Letter to Diognetus*, 5,5; Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2240.

^[12] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians*, 1: AAS 93 (2001), 76.

^[13] *Ibid.*, 4.

^[14] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 31; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1915.

^[15] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 75.

^[16] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, 42: AAS 81 (1989), 472. The present doctrinal *Note* refers to the involvement in political life of lay members of the faithful. The Bishops of the Church have the right and the duty to set out the moral principles relating to the social order; «Nevertheless active participation in political parties is reserved to the lay faithful» (*ibid.*, 60). Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (March 31, 1994), 33.

^[17] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

^[18] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 36.

^[19] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 7; Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 36; Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 31 and 43.

^[100] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 42.

^[11] In the last two centuries, the Papal Magisterium has spoken on the principal questions regarding the social and political order. Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Diuturnum illud*: ASS 14 (1881–1882), 4 ff; Encyclical Letter *Immortale Dei*: ASS 18 (1885–1886), 162ff; Encyclical Letter *Libertas præstantissimum*: ASS 20 (1887–1888), 593ff; Encyclical Letter *Rerum novarum*: ASS 23 (1890–1891), 643ff; Benedict XV, Encyclical Letter *Pacem Dei munus pulcherrimum*: AAS 12 (1920), 209ff; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo anno*: AAS 23 (1931), 190ff; Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender Sorge*: AAS 29 (1937), 145–167; Encyclical Letter *Divini Redemptoris*: AAS 29 (1937), 78ff; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Summi Pontificatus*: AAS 31 (1939), 423ff; *Radiomessaggi natalizi 1941–1944*; John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et magistra*: AAS 53 (1961), 401–464; Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris*: AAS 55 (1963), 257–304; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum progressio*: AAS 59 (1967), 257–299; Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens*: AAS 63 (1971), 401–441.

^[12] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, 46: AAS 83 (1991); Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*, 101: AAS 85 (1993), 1212–1213; *Discourse to the Italian Parliament*, 5: *L'Osservatore Romano* (November 15, 2002).

^[13] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, 22: AAS 87 (1995), 425–426.

^[14] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

^[15] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 75.

^[16] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 43 and 75.

^[17] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 25.

^[18] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 73.

^[19] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium vitae*, 73.

^[20] *Ibid.*

^[21] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 75.

^[22] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2304.

^[23] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 76.

^[24] John Paul II, *Message for the 1991 World Day of Peace*: «If you want peace, respect the conscience of every person», 4: AAS 83 (1991), 414–415.

^[25] John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 59.

^[26] Cf. John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*: *L'Osservatore Romano* (January 11, 2002).

^[27] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, 90: AAS 91 (1999), 75.

^[28] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, 1: «This Sacred Council begins by professing that God himself has made known to the human race how men by serving him can be saved and reach the state of the blessed. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church». This does not lessen the sincere respect that the Church has for the various religious traditions, recognizing in them «elements of truth and goodness». See also, Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 16; Decree *Ad gentes*,

11; Declaration *Nostra aetate*, 2; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 55: AAS 83 (1991), 302–304; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 2, 8, 21: AAS 92 (2000), 742–765.

^[29] Paul VI, *Address to the Sacred College and to the Roman Prelature*: in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, 14 (1976), 1088–1089.

^[30] Cf. Pius IX, Encyclical Letter *Quanta cura*: ASS 3 (1867), 162; Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Immortale Dei*: ASS 18 (1885), 170–171; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quas primas*: AAS 17 (1925), 604–605; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2108; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 22.

^[31] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 43; see also John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 59.

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