Is Globalization an Opportunity or a Threat?
Interview with Philosophy Professor Jesús Villagrasa

ROME, APR. 23, 2001 (Zenit.org).- The summit of the Americas, which ended in Quebec on Sunday, rallied a diverse group of protesters around a perceived common enemy: globalization.


Father Villagrasa's work summarizes John Paul II's thought on globalization, illuminated by Church social doctrine.

--Q: Is globalization a danger, a threat or an opportunity?

--Father Villagrasa: It is an event, a fact, a seemingly irresistible and irreversible phenomenon, which will become increasingly important. It is not a fatal fact, because it is the result of free choices. Like all human endeavors, it is full of promises and opportunities, but also of grave dangers.

A few months ago, the Pope referred to globalization as a "great sign of our time." The Church is reading this sign very carefully; in its social doctrine, it offers guidelines for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action.

The book refers to the most important of these. Above all, globalization is a moral challenge: Very many critical issues regarding man's destiny are at stake. There are opportunities that must be taken advantage of, and obstacles that must be avoided.

--Q: The Pope speaks of positive and negative aspects of globalization. What do you think these are?

--Father Villagrasa: At least three dimensions must be distinguished, because globalization is such a complex phenomenon: the technical/economic, the sociopolitical and the cultural.

Mixed together, there seem to be positive elements:

- the increase in efficiency and production,
- intense relations between countries and cultures,
- the strengthening of the process of unity among peoples, the new possibilities to express solidarity with less fortunate members of the human family.

The risks [are]
• the preponderance of the economy over any other human value, which robs cultures of their soul;
• the logic of the market, whose unjust competition increases the gap between the rich and poor;
• the great powers that tend to establish monopolies, cancel national sovereignty, and make culture models uniform.

In any case, it is better to spell out the issues: For whom is this aspect of the present globalization positive?

--Q: Critics of globalization see it as something fateful, controlled by a few power groups. Is there no way of breaking this "perverse" system?

--Father Villagrasa: Globalization is not "intrinsically perverse." It is not right to attribute all existing evils to it. Neither is it a fatal process. Historical and cultural processes depend, to a certain extent, on the freedom of men. And there is also God's providence. I very much doubt that globalization is a "controlled" process. Of course, there are important power groups that exert strong, though hidden, tyrannies. Globalization should not necessarily lead to new oligarchies.

Although it might seem simplistic, I think the way to break "perverse systems," wherever they are found, is evangelization: the evangelical commitment of Christians in the economy, politics, the drafting of legislation, education, the media. There are no recipes, but the principles of the social doctrine of the Church acquire extraordinary relevance in the new context of globalization.

--Q: Can this theological reading of reality be proposed?

--Father Villagrasa: I don't see any better one. In itself, the phenomenon of globalization has a great future because it is in keeping with human nature: We aspire to communion and communication with others. By origin and end, we men are called to form only one family, as "children of Eve," and "children of the Father who is in heaven."

However, God places man's destiny and future in [man's] hands. With his help, we are the builders of that "human family" and "community of nations" -- something that is not easy, because sin and its global consequences are patent.

In constructing the Tower of Babel, men aspired to "global" unity, but things did not go well. For the time being, globalization seems to be a phenomenon of Babel: By ignoring God, divisions among men become deeper. However, God can do what men on their own cannot do: gather humanity into one family.

The Church, sacrament of unity of the human species, was born on the day of Pentecost, and is a family speaking all languages; the architects of the new global order, including nonbelievers, would do well to listen to its magisterium. We need a Pentecostal globalization, not one like Babel's.
--Q: The Pope warns about the danger of "uniformity," a danger he defines as "cultural imperialism." What is the threat and how can it be avoided?

--Father Villagrasa: In his exhortation "Church in America," the Holy Father warned about the imposition of new scales of values, often arbitrary and materialistic, in face of which it is difficult to maintain adhesion to Gospel values, and which destroy the values of local cultures in favor of a misunderstood equalization.

However, this situation is not avoided by isolating or "folklorizing" cultures. Cultures need "internal life," not customs [barriers] or walls. The Church, by its proclamation of the Gospel and Catholic universality, vivifies cultures from within and serves a cultural globalization that respects differences. The challenge for the Church is old and new: inculturation, the transformation of genuine cultural values through their integration in Christianity, and the establishment of Christianity in the different cultures.

Globalization puts religions and cultures, which are living realities, in touch; with the exception of some repressive regimes, there are "juntas and uprisings," each one with its pretension of worth. The magic words of "tolerance and dialogue" do not solve anything; the problems continue unresolved.

Tolerance has its own limitation: to determine what is intolerable. Tolerance as an "ideology," not as a virtue, is dangerous because it is relativistic and the seed of totalitarianism. In order to be genuine, dialogue, including between cultures, must take place within certain criteria and be based on the "grammar" of the spirit, which is the universal moral law engraved in the human heart. Again, the Church's magisterium is giving invaluable direction.

--Q: Don't you think that, basically, the Seattle protesters were right?

--Father Villagrasa: There is a bit of everything among them. A certain unity was seen in the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre [Brazil] at the end of the month of January [2001].

The declaration made by the social movements retains the ideological tone of the old Left; however, the Parliamentarians' Social Forum rightly criticizes deficient aspects of the present market system and associates itself with laudable campaigns, which support the cancellation of the debt of poor countries, favor their exports, and contrast the lack of concern of rich countries' multinationals with the impact of their decisions on poor countries. Globalization is a fact and multinationals must assume the responsibility for the global consequences of their decisions. It would be a regrettable error to equate these claims and demands with the utopian pretensions of violent or "ignorant" activists.

In any case, I don't think anyone has made such radical demands as John Paul II. He is not an exaggerated critic of globalization; his magisterium is very enlightening because it
is evangelical, realistic and exacting, directed to constructive, reasonable and operative proposals. He is not a critic [of globalization], because he sees so many latent opportunities in this complex and ambiguous phenomenon.