

Catholic Countries And Progressive Social Change **by İdil Çakmut**

Cultures, traditions, moral values... Varying from society to society, being shaped by totally distinct concepts, however sharing an exact same core: Religion. Throughout history, religion has always been at the center of human life, no matter which part of the world you dwell in. States had established laws based on common notions, people judged each other whether their lifestyles fitted the holy sayings or not... And this went on. However, today, we started to witness changes even in the most conservative societies. Some states have started to make progressive alterations in their approaches to some highly controversial topics. Yet, there are still some states which prefer to turn a deaf ear to the requests of their own people and even make decisions that worsen the conditions for people who keep fighting for their individual liberties.

One of the most long-lasting religions in the world, Catholicism, the largest sect of Christianity with over 1 billion followers, has preserved many of its ancient beliefs and traditions till today. (1) Well, this preservation is without a doubt highly appreciated, however, in our today's world when we look at communities with Catholic predominance, we see that these old traditions and their practices in state governance create debates. Heated debates between conservatives and liberals have risen in the last decade. Activists have been organizing huge demonstrations all over the world in order to make changes in their countries. Changes that allow people to make their own choices. Changes that guarantee the security of people's individual rights and liberties. Well, these campaigns have started to bring positive outcomes in various corners of the world. These outcomes flourished hopes and galvanized many who keep fighting in distinct parts of the world. Now, let's take a look at some of these actions that have a crucial significance.

In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. This was a massive social reform for the Catholic world, in consideration of the fact that Ireland still remains as one of the most loyal nations to the Vatican. Irish people voted 62% "Yes" to same-sex marriage and became precedence to other nations. This was not only a milestone for Ireland but also a milestone for the entire world. The result of the referendum created an ecstatic atmosphere all around the country. Massive crowds, including the politicians, gathered in the streets and celebrated this revolution. (2) Following Ireland, in January 2020, Northern Ireland made history and legalized same-sex marriage. This remarkable change was also addressed as an important step to ensure equality for all in Northern Ireland. (3)

Moving to South America, we have Argentina. A conservative region with a presence of a highly influential Catholic church and a growing evangelical community, Argentina became the third country in Latin America to legalize abortion in December 2020. It was a super long journey for the Argentines. Never-ending debates, ongoing demonstrations, campaigns... After years and years of efforts, pro-choice Argentine activists succeeded and overturned the abortion law which dated back to 1921. Now, women in Argentina can legally terminate their pregnancies for any reason up to 14 weeks free of charge in public hospitals. Becoming the largest Latin American country to permit abortion, Argentina indeed encouraged its entire continent to make a change. They depicted that change is possible for all. (4) (5) (6)

On the other hand, we have some conservative states where the situation aggravates every single day. To exemplify one, Poland, being one of the most religious countries in Europe, has been a home for crises related to LGBT rights. Religious and liberal folk values usually clash and lead

to a chaotic environment in the country. For instance, back in September 2020, circa 100 towns and regions all across the country, nearly one-third of Poland, adopted resolutions and declared their regions as “LGBT Free Zones”. They describe homosexuality as an illness that can be cured and emphasize that they want their children to grow up in “normal” Polish families away from the perilous “LGBT ideology”. While the European Union strongly condemned this act of discrimination, the Polish president Mr. Duda kept stating that “LGBT ideology” is even more destructive than communism. (7) (8) (9)

Overall, we started to witness social changes all around the world, even in the most conservative ones. Change is not only present in Catholic states. Change is here for everyone, for every state. Religion’s impact on constitutions and state governments has started to lose its power. People’s liberties have started to win over the religious norms. Although there have been some regressive movements going on, at this age, the secular movement’s success is inevitable. Let’s hope for a future world, where equality and freedom are existent for all. Let’s hope that these positive changes inspire the rest and build an environment in which discrimination does not exist.