Ethics and Politics

Speech at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., May 14, 1992

Ladies and gentlemen:

I cannot hide the deep emotion I feel upon receiving the honorary degree that Georgetown University is conferring upon me today. I am grateful for it on my own behalf, but above all on behalf of the people of Chile, whose love of freedom led them to [re]conquer democracy with courage and wisdom.

During those difficult years, you accompanied us by welcoming some of our compatriots and offering your insights to help us understand the processes of democratization in Latin America.

That is why today I want to speak of the immense value that the world of ideas holds for those who live in the world of practical realities.

Just like you, I was a classroom man, and part of my heart remains there. I have also been—and continue to be—a man of politics, and from that perspective, I see the urgent need to renew the relationship between these two worlds.

In this time of uncertainty and hope, when the conceptual frameworks that once inspired us seem to be running dry, your reflections must provide new insights into political thought and action, distancing it from the risk of pure pragmatism and from becoming a mere exercise in the administration of power for power's sake. I am also a Catholic politician, and as such I believe that Catholic universities, heirs to such a rich tradition, must reinforce their mission to reflect on the world through the lens of *science* and **ethics**.

For this reason, I particularly value this University's decision to establish a Center for Advanced Studies in Ethics, dedicated to teaching and research.

I fully agree with the eloquent statement regarding the need for such Center, which is found in the description of its program: "In order for modern men and women not to feel overwhelmed by their technological achievements, their

cultural differences, or the allure of their own interests, they must be capable of mature reflection and moral judgment."

In response to my concern in this regard, I would like to share with you some reflections on the necessary connection between **ethics** and *politics*, from the perspective of my convictions and my experiences as a Chilean politician.

History shows us that, although fighting for a cause or adhering to ethical standards does not always bring practical advantages, it is also true—as Maritain affirmed—that victories not grounded in the greater good are momentary because of their very nature. This constitutes a well-founded reason for hope for all true peacemakers.

My generation had the opportunity to witness, with horror, the effects of political triumphs achieved by cruel and immoral leaders, such as Hitler or Stalin. In our Latin American nations, we have also experienced the consequences of doctrines that disregarded human dignity and that, in the name of justice or security, trampled on fundamental values and ended up destroying our social cohesion.

Nowadays, when the ideas of freedom, justice, and solidarity are resounding strongly across the world, theoretical and practical Machiavellianism continues, however, to attract far too many followers.

Many politicians of our time seem to believe that success requires flexibility when it comes to ethical demands. In the name of a supposed realism in politics, and in the interest of supposed greater effectiveness and efficiency, acts whose morality is questionable are justified.

This situation results in a dramatic duality: politicians who, in good faith, seek the good of their people end up tolerating exceptions and excuses to justify actions that are at odds with morality, whether in the media or in their personal behavior.

In turn, the public, which initially reacts with outrage to these events, ends up falling into deep skepticism toward all politicians and toward politics itself as an activity.

This is a reality that occurs in modern democracies, to different extents, posing an immense challenge to live politics in accordance with principles and values.

I come from a distant, young country that takes pride in its history, in a long democratic tradition, in a volatile region, and in generations of politicians who viewed public office as a service.

I was shaped by that tradition. I am son of a judge; I practiced law driven by a calling for justice; and I have spent half a century in politics, fighting for the ideals I embraced in my youth—ideals that remain relevant as ever.

I also come from a country that has endured difficult and painful experiences, but one that has managed to find its own paths to resolving conflicts.

Over these many years, I have learned that a politician's actions consist, on the one hand, of the noble aspirations that inspire them—the values in which they believe and which they try to implement—and, on the other hand, of reality itself, which imposes limitations, whether due to a lack of resources, legal instruments, economic means, collective consensus, or a thousand other circumstances.

That is why to govern is not to do whatever you want, but to do what you can of what you want. This justifies the idea that "politics is the art of the possible." Sometimes, this leads us into situations where the alternatives are not as good as we would like, and circumstances force us to choose between options that seem either bad or merely mediocre. Therefore, the right and brave thing to do is to choose the better of two evils—or the least bad one—and not to try at all costs for a perfect solution that is impossible, nor to throw up our hands and give up.

It is in these cases that the virtue of prudence becomes necessary. A leader, a politician must have courage, bravery, and boldness to fight for what he believes in. However, he must also have prudence to avoid embarking on adventures or paths that lead to disaster or greater evils.

I will never forget the impression made on me on an occasion when I had the privilege of being received by the Holy Father Pablo VI. When I told him about the troubles of the reality we were living through [in Chile], he encouraged me to have "courage, patience, and boldness." These may seem contradictory, yet they are complementary.

Max Weber distinguished between the ethics of conviction or witness and the ethics of responsibility. The latter cannot be reduced to empty pragmatism, rather it must be combined with a strong dose of conviction.

For this reason, the major ethical and political challenge for those who aspire to serve their people is to be able to renounce the pursuit of utopias, but without renouncing ideals or the dream of a better world.

Truth, honesty, justice, and Solidarity are the ethical cornerstones upon which political action is built. So too is the ability to reach compromises—to make concessions, not to compromise ideals, but to set aside personal, party, or ideological interests, since all of these must be subordinated to the good of the community, which is the guiding principle of a politician's work.

The experience of recent years in Chile has been shaped by these principles. We Chileans have peacefully restored our democracy through a long journey, undertaken with perseverance by a people who learned through suffering to prioritize reason over force. We also learned to seek solutions to conflicts, grounded in reality and reconciling the affirmation of fundamental values with courage and prudence.

It is true that this path has imposed limitations in our actions that may not be understood by those observing our process from the outside. But it is precisely this delicate balance between continuity and change that has allowed us to successfully navigate the complex transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one, without the death and destruction that typically accompany the collapse of dictatorships. We are also certain that this is the way to build a solid system for Chileans today and for those of tomorrow.

As President of Chile, I believe that the greatest value of this experience lies not in its being an interesting model for the study of transitions to democracy, but in the moral choice our people have made in favor of peace, justice, and freedom. Herein lies the deepest key to understanding why this process has been exemplary in more ways than one.

In the face of authoritarianism, our people adopted a political approach based on negotiation and the search for peaceful conflict resolution, which ultimately prevailed over the logic of war that characterized authoritarian rule.

Contributing to this was the presence of strong political leaders and parties, who were able to endow the transition process with the wisdom to combine prudence with firm adherence to principles, to properly assess risks and opportunities, and to know when to compromise and when to persevere.

This enabled us to mobilize more than 90 percent of potential voters to participate in the 1988 plebiscite, the fairness of which was the subject of well-founded doubts.

Victory in that event allowed us to defeat authoritarianism and, subsequently, to democratically elect the President of Chile and members of Congress in 1989.

As Professor Valenzuela has so aptly recalled here, that sense of reality, the desire to seek what unites us rather than what divides us, the desire to say "never again to war among Chileans" is what has made possible the coalition of parties that were once antagonistic and had bitter clashes among ourselves, yet have learned through experience that there is far more that unites us than divides us, and that, coming from different philosophical and intellectual traditions, with different sources of inspiration, we can unite our wills and our actions to build together a Chile that guarantees all its inhabitants a way of living together founded on the values of peace, respect for human dignity, a commitment to justice, and, above all, a love of freedom.

The attenuation of ideological dogmatism and a convergence toward programs and objectives of national interest have allowed for the emergence of a new style of politics in our country, [one] that has been expressed in a shared willingness among allies and adversaries to seek the broadest possible consensus for solving major national problems, such as foreign relations, national defense, and the economic development of Chile.

This is a style that is in keeping with our tradition, and one that we hope to continue deepening so that our country can face the major challenges that lie ahead: consolidating its democracy, achieving economic growth, and effectively integrating all Chileans into the efforts and benefits of development, in order to improve the lives of our people.

Thank you very much.