



Catholic Civil Rights League

Ligue Catholique pour les Droits de L'Homme

The Church and Politics

The Church's mission is religious, not political, economic or social.¹ However, her religious mission is not limited to spreading the gospel, but includes the renewal and improvement of the whole world.² The religious mission of the Church motivates political activity, providing "the source of commitment, direction, and vigour to establish and consolidate the community of men according to the law of God."³

This does not bring something foreign to political life. Non-religious people are motivated by various non-religious beliefs, such as a belief in the dignity of man, the role of religion in society, and the purpose and limits of law. These people act on their beliefs when they become involved in politics. They attempt to maintain or reform existing institutions to reflect their beliefs about how to structure society and the state to serve the common good. Religious believers do exactly the same thing, though they draw their motivation and ideas from different sources.

To forbid citizens to express and to act upon their beliefs in politics is a plain impossibility. To forbid only religious believers to express and act upon their beliefs in politics is plain bigotry.⁴ The proper approach, especially in a democratic state, is to encourage all citizens to work for the common good in public life, whether they are motivated by religious or non-religious beliefs.

Acting independently and in different ways, the Church and the political community serve the common good:⁵ the good that "embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfilment."⁶ Catholics should set an example by their sense of responsibility and dedication in this work.⁷

The common good, as understood by the Church, precludes injustice to individuals committed in the name of a purported greater good for a greater number, or in the name of some "public good" or public policy, or on the basis of a cost/benefit or benefit/burdens analysis. What is fundamentally opposed to the dignity of a single human person can never form part of the common good.⁸

This does not mean that Catholic teaching should be made the law of the land.⁹ It is important to establish a proper relationship between the political community and the Church. Catholics must acknowledge legitimate differences in points of view and show respect for our fellow citizens in political activity.¹⁰ We must carefully distinguish between the rights and the duties of Catholics as members of the Church and those we share with our fellow non-Catholic citizens. However, this important distinction is not made in order to isolate religious from political responsibilities, but to fully respect both, and to ensure that they are harmonized to serve the common good.¹¹

Such harmony already exists. Laws against murder, assault, fraud, theft and perjury, for example, formally incorporate basic Christian teaching into criminal law. Labour laws that protect workers from exploitation reflect principles enunciated by successive popes since Leo XIII in 1891. So it is quite wrong to claim, as many now do, that religious conviction cannot form the basis for sound public policy, that religious beliefs cannot be permitted to influence political activity or shape legislation, or that principles of pluralism or democracy preclude the public expression of religious beliefs.

Neither pluralism nor democracy require Catholics to surrender the freedom of expression and political action taken for granted by atheists and anti-religious secularists. We do not envy them their freedom, but we demand the same freedom for ourselves and for all religious believers. That freedom is our birthright, not a gift bestowed by political or judicial elites on those who share their world view, nor a trinket to be traded for public office or the favours of a party leader.

Notes

1. Vatican Council II, [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World](#), 7 December, 1965 (Gaudium et Spes) 42
2. Vatican Council II, [Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People](#), 18 November, 1965 (Apostolicam Actuositatem) 5
3. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 42
4. But just as it must be recognized that the terrestrial city, rightly concerned with secular affairs, is governed by its own principles, thus also the ominous doctrine which seeks to build society with no regard for religion, and attacks and utterly destroys the religious liberty of its citizens, is rightly to be rejected. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November, 1964 (Lumen Gentium) 36
5. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 76
6. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 74
7. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 75
8. [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), 1905-1912, 1925
9. Not everything that is immoral should or even could be made illegal, especially in a pluralistic democracy. For example, Catholic teaching is that attempted suicide, objectively considered, is a gravely immoral act. Attempted suicide was once a criminal offence. The offence was abolished because it was recognized that the problem of attempted suicide is better addressed through mental health intervention than by the criminal law. The abolition of the offence for these reasons was consistent with Catholic teaching.
10. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 75
11. [Gaudium et Spes](#), 76; [Lumen Gentium](#), 36; [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), 912.