

The Catholic Politician: Facing the Moral Issues of the Day

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In 1989, Communism collapsed suddenly and completely throughout the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This was caused immediately by the events in Poland where the independent trade union, Solidarnosc, had won overwhelmingly the first free election seen in the post-war years. It also reflected the moral and economic bankruptcy of a centralised bureaucratic political and economic system that simply failed to work.

By the end of that year, most of Eastern Europe was free of the Communist regimes that had been imposed by Stalin's armies at the end of World War II, and which had been kept in office by the direct occupation by or the immediate threat from the Red Army in the period ever since.

The liberation of Eastern Europe from oppressive Communist dictatorship was followed in 1991 by the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union itself, and the separation of that country into its 15 constituent republics, each now able to determine its own system of national government for the future.

It was widely anticipated at this time that the ideological divisions that had motivated political parties had come to an end. The ideological divide between left and right which had dominated the political systems of the countries of the western world seemed now to be over. The ideological divisions within the world's labour parties and trade union movement, which had for so long caused battles for influence and control, seemed to have come to an end.

However, almost as if on cue, new issues arose which have proven to be extremely divisive, especially for politicians. These issues relate to questions of the family, its definition and unique status, the protection to be given to human life at its most vulnerable stages, and the moral behaviour of individuals. They have come to divide the political community and society in a different way to the left versus right divide of the past.

Moral Issues in the Political Arena

In 2000, during the proceedings of the National Conference of the Australian Labor Party, an issue arose on the sidelines which started a deep division within the Party on serious moral issues.

A single woman in Victoria had taken a case to the Federal Court under the federal Anti-Discrimination Legislation, challenging the refusal to give her access under State law to in-vitro fertilisation services because she was a single woman.

The State Legislation provided that IVF services would only be available to a woman who had a steady male partner in her life.

A single judge of the Federal Court found that the State law on access to IVF contravened the federal Anti-Discrimination Legislation, because it discriminated on the basis of marital status.

The Parliamentary Leader of the Labor Party, Kim Beazley, authorised one of his Shadow Ministers to tell the press that the Labor Party supported the woman's position.

At the time, I was asked to comment and I told the media that I disagreed with the Federal Court's decision. I sought out Mr. Beazley to discuss the issue but despite a long conversation with him, I was unable to persuade him to change his mind.

Ultimately, this matter was raised at a meeting of the National Executive of the Labor Party where the Leader's position was upheld by a vote of 14 to 7. Kim Beazley's view was supported by two members from the Right, the 11 members from the Left and the Centre Left, together with Beazley himself.

A new division had now arisen in the Labor Party between those who were prepared to uphold traditional values and norms regarding personal behaviour, and those who supported the new demand of a secular and humanist society that an individual should be permitted to do anything, provided it did not interfere with the rights of other adults. We should note that the rights of the unborn and of children are disregarded by the secular view.

This development meant that the traditional political divide of the Left versus the Right could no longer adequately describe the division of opinion on these new issues. Those wishing to protect traditional values and the principles that underpin them were now divided from other people with whom they had historically been aligned.

This issue was the first of many that has arisen since the turn of the century to divide the political scene.

In 2003, the National Parliament debated and ultimately approved legislation to permit the production of embryonic stem cells for research purposes. Human embryos that were certified as surplus to the requirements of IVF and that were held in storage could, under the legislation, and with the parents' permission, now be destroyed to harvest stem cells to be used in research. The destruction of human life in the process of harvesting such cells was legalised.

In 2004, the National Parliament debated the definition of "marriage" and ultimately decided by majority vote that marriage involves a personal relationship between a man and a woman, therefore excluding same-sex relationships. This seemed to be a victory for the traditional view. However, State Parliaments around Australia have been busy legislating that certain privileges and benefits hitherto only available to married couples and to hetero-sexual de-facto couples should now also be also available to same-sex couples. In this way, the unique status of marriage has been undermined.

Now the federal Parliament under the new Rudd Government intends to amend 100 or so Acts of Parliament to extend to same-sex couples the benefits and privileges previously available only to married and heterosexual de-facto couples.

In Tasmania, the State Parliament has set up a register for same-sex couples to record their relationship. This provides such couples with automatic access to all the rights and privileges of married couples under State law. The Victorian Government has followed suit.

In fact, the Labor Party, at its Federal Conference in April last year, adopted a policy to encourage all State Governments to follow the Tasmanian example of establishing a same-sex register.

The ACT Government wants to establish a register for civil unions between same sex couples. The Howard Government over-rode an earlier version of this legislation but the Territory Government has again been pressing ahead following the federal election last year.

The Rudd Government has said it will dis-allow any Territory legislation that allows gay couples to have their relationship recognised in a legally binding ceremony because this would mimic marriage. It will, however, allow a relationship register as in Tasmania.

All these developments undermine the institution of marriage. By giving same-sex couples access to all the benefits and privileges of a married couple, the unique status of the institution of marriage is destroyed. Having given same-sex couples the same status as a married couple, it is only a matter of time before Parliament will recognise same-sex marriage.

In 2006, the National Parliament debated whether the chemical “RU486” should be made available within Australia at the discretion of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (T.G.A.) or whether its availability should continue to be a decision of the Minister for Health. Behind this debate was the knowledge that if it remained a decision of the Minister, it would likely continue to be refused. Delegating the responsibility to the T.G.A. however, would ultimately result in its availability to women, enabling them to procure an abortion through the use of the chemical in the early stages of a pregnancy.

The Parliament decided to give the responsibility to the T.G.A. and, as expected, it has now licensed certain providers to use RU486 for ending pregnancies.

In 2006, the National Parliament also debated whether cloning of human beings should be permitted for the purposes of providing a new source of embryonic stem cells. Cloning involves the artificial production of human life and its destruction for the purposes of obtaining the embryonic stem cells for research purposes. Such cloning was approved and several State Parliaments have enacted complementary legislation to give medical researchers access to this new source of embryonic stem cells.

Several other crucial issues are presently being considered by a Parliament, or shortly to be introduced. They include: -

- A Bill to permit euthanasia introduced into the Senate by Bob Brown of the Greens;
- The expected move by the Government of Victoria to decriminalise Abortion;
- A Bill to permit euthanasia expected to be introduced into the Victorian Parliament by Liberal MLA, Ken Smith; and
- A review of the exceptions and exemptions in the Equal Opportunity Act in Victoria announced by the State Attorney-General.

Divisions in the Political Parties

These new issues have caused divisions within each of the major political parties.

In the Federal Coalition, a number of individuals including Tony Abbott, Nick Minchin, Kevin Andrews and others have been prepared to stand up for traditional values and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Others have voted the other way.

It has been notable that many of the female members of the Coalition have voted against the protection of human life when these matters have been debated in the National Parliament.

In a similar way, these issues have divided the Labor Party. Well known politicians such as John Hogg, Mark Bishop, Ursula Stephens and Jacinta Collins have voted in support of the teachings of the Catholic Church, while many others, including those who claim to be Catholics, have voted the other way.

The issues themselves demonstrate that we have entered a new stage in political debate within society, where the supporters of an aggressive secularist and humanist culture are pursuing their views in order to change the nature of the society to their views.

The Anti-Discrimination Laws passed innocently by the National Parliament in the 1980's have been used in support of these new views. This is despite the fact that at the time, Senator Brian Harradine sought and received an assurance from the then Attorney General, Senator Gareth Evans, that the then proposed Anti-Discrimination Legislation would not be used against Catholic moral principles as we see happening today.

Church Teaching for Catholic Politicians

In 2002, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Catholic Church issued a Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding "The Participation of Catholics in Political Life."

The Sovereign Pontiff, John Paull II, in an audience on November 21, 2002, approved this note which had been adopted in the Plenary Session of the Congregation and he ordered its publication.

The Congregation directed its Doctrinal Note 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.

The document starts by asserting that Christians throughout history have played their full role as citizens and have been actively involved in politics and government.

It mentions St. Thomas More, who was proclaimed patron of Statesmen and Politicians, and who gave witness by his martyrdom to the inalienable dignity of the human conscience. The document says that although he was subjected to various forms of pressure, St. 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.”*

The document says that by fulfilling their civic duties, guided by a Christian conscience, in conformity with its values, the lay faithful exercise their proper task of infusing the temporal order with Christian values.

The document makes it clear that there is a 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.

The document states – *“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 judgement of each person. It is, however, the Church’s right and duty to provide a moral judgement on temporal matters when this is required by faith or the moral law.”*

The Doctrinal Note recognises the complex issues that have arisen in recent times, some of which have never been faced by past generations. It says that scientific progress has resulted in advances that are unsettling for the consciences of men and women, and which call for solutions that respect ethical principles in a coherent and fundamental way.

The obligation of a Catholic politician to vote against any law that attacks human life is made crystal clear.

The Note states: *“John Paul II, continuing the constant teaching of the Church, has reiterated many times that those who are directly involved in law-making 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.”*

The Catholic politician's obligations are not limited just to life issues. In fact, they extend to all fundamental issues of faith and morals.

The Doctrinal Note puts it as follows: "*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.*"

The document then goes on to state the clear obligation of the Catholic politician in the following terms: -

"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 recognise 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 forego *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 recognised 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)*".

The document makes it clear that 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. It is not a question of imposing on society specific Catholic values. The ethical precepts in question are rooted in human nature itself and are part of the natural moral law. Although the Church's teaching confirms and defends them, they do not require those who defend them to profess the Christian faith. They reflect the truth about man and the common good of civil society.

Finally, the document explains the reasons for the Church's teaching as contained in the document. It states: *“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.”*

Facing the Issues In Truth

There is nothing in the Doctrinal Note on the duties and obligations of lay Catholics in public life that is surprising or disturbing. In my own case, I have tried to respond to the issues faced in the political arena in the way described in the Doctrinal Note long before the document was ever drawn to my attention. We have an obligation to live our lives in accordance with Catholic teaching, and by so doing to provide an example to others.

It is a fact, however, that many lay Catholics have responded differently. Some individuals who describe themselves as Catholics have supported and voted for those items of legislation that our aggressive secular and humanist opponents have proposed in order to change the moral basis of our society in a fundamental way.

Why is this so ?

There are many possible explanations, but let me pose some of the possibilities.

Firstly, a person may be ignorant of the teachings of the Catholic faith on basic moral issues. In view of the poverty of much of our religious education today, this is not altogether surprising. The solution is to improve our religious education so that every person who describes himself/herself as a Catholic knows and understands the basic teachings of Jesus Christ and his Church.

A second explanation is that the self-described Catholic in public life has lost his/her faith. He/she no longer accepts the teachings of the Catholic faith. Such a person is no longer a Catholic. He/she has moved to a new set of beliefs which are different to those of the Church, and such a person is no longer accurately described as a Catholic. Such a person needs conversion back to his/her faith so that Catholic belief is restored.

A third explanation is that the Catholic in public life is not prepared to uphold the teachings of the Church in his/her public life, although he/she does believe them or claims to believe them in his/her heart. There are many reasons for such a disposition: -

1. Upholding Catholic teaching may be seen as a barrier to promotion and advancement in public life. Progress in one's career is put ahead of giving witness to one's beliefs.
2. Upholding Catholic teaching may be seen as unpopular, or embarrassing, or likely to lead to ridicule or criticism, either from one's peers and associates or from parts of society in general.
3. Upholding Catholic teaching may be viewed as imposing one's moral beliefs on others in a manner that is inappropriate in a plural society.
4. The lay Catholic may disregard Church teaching as an act of deliberate disobedience, perhaps to win accolades and admiration in secular society or to spite the Church and/or its leaders for some particular reason.

In each case, we see the Catholic acting contrary to Catholic belief and assisting the secular humanist revolution that is changing the structure and moral basis of our society. We see the Catholic acting contrary to the way the Church explicitly teaches him/her to act.

In dealing with the various challenges we face in public life, the lay Catholic must first of all search for the truth.

Jesus told us that he is “The Way, the Truth and the Life”.

He told his disciples that he would send them the Spirit of Truth to teach them all things, to remind them of all he had told them and to guide them into all truth.

We have the Church today, guided by the Holy Spirit, teaching us the truth in matters of faith (what we must believe) and morals (how we much live the Christian life).

In dealing with the issues in public life, we must search for the Truth.

- What is the truth about man ?
- What is the truth of man’s origin, his purpose in this life and his destiny ?
- What is the truth about the particular moral or ethical issue in question ?
- What does the Church teach us about this particular issue?
- How do we best put into practice our beliefs on this particular question ?

We as Catholics are not alone in facing the great moral issues of the day. Men and women of other Christian beliefs, or other religions or of no religion are also in pursuit of the truth in life and are frequently close allies on the issues in question. We must work with them to help achieve the common good.

If we look around us at society today, we can have no doubt that the secular humanist revolution has put us on the wrong track: -

- The high rate of breakdown of marriage and the damaging impact this has on children.
- The widespread use of drugs and excessive consumption of alcohol.
- The widespread use of pornography with the impact this has on the perception of women.
- The impact of violence and criminal assault.
- The disregard for human life at its most vulnerable stages, particularly prior to birth and at its final stages later in life.
- The selfish approach to life by the “ME” generation, intent on satisfying all our material desires and disregarding the plight of our neighbours.

It often seems that each new “reform” of our laws will simply intensify the problems in our society and make no contribution whatsoever to a solution.

It is in this environment that we are asked to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”, thereby giving an example to others around us in public life.

The previous Pontiff, John Paul II, looked to the new Millennium to bring a New Evangelisation to the Western world. May all lay Catholics who are involved in public life, through their obedience to the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church, help to bring about this New Evangelisation that our society so desperately needs.