

The Political Responsibility of Christians

Intro: I begin with a little noticed “contradiction” in the Bible. In 1 Sam 8-12 the Bible discusses the rise of kingship in Israel. Up to then, judges had led a loose confederation of the Twelve Tribes descended from the twelve sons of Israel. As long as their enemies were divided and possessed the same Middle Bronze Age weapons as they, the tribes were able to defend their territories. But in the eleventh century the Philistines, an Indo-European people with an Iron Age culture, invaded the eastern Mediterranean and began to take over territory from the twelve tribes. At that time some Hebrews saw that their loose confederation was not strong enough to withstand such an organized onslaught, and they cried out for a king, like the other nations. 1 Sam 8-12 records the dialogue that resulted from that outcry.

The conservative, anti-monarchy position, represented by 1 Sam 8:6-22 (and later, 10:17-27) maintains that 1) a human king displaces Yahweh as the king of Israel, and 2) a human king will exploit the ordinary citizens to finance his royal palace, his harem, his bureaucracy, and his armies. Listen to their indictment of kingship:

These will be the rights of the king who will rule you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his fields and reap his harvest, and to make his weapons of war and the gear of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, vineyards, and olive groves and give them to his officials. He will take 10% of your grain and your vineyards and give it to his officers and eunuchs. He will take the best of your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and use them for his work. He will take 10% of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you on that day.” (1 Sam 8:11-18)

This diatribe draws upon King Solomon's excesses in subverting the egalitarian social order of earlier Hebrew society.

The pro-monarchy position, represented by 1 Sam 9:1-10:16 (and later by 11:1-15) holds that 1) it is God who takes the initiative in selecting and anointing a king, and 2) a king, with a centralized government, will be God's agent of liberation from the Philistines:

“I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin whom you are to anoint as commander of my people Israel. He shall save my people from the clutches of the Philistines for I have witnessed their misery and accepted their cry for help (1 Sam 9:16).”

For the anti-monarchic position, God sighs, and gives in to the will of his people (1 Sam 8:22); for the pro-monarchic position, God initiates kingship because it is through centralized government that He will save his people.

So which side does the Bible take? The Bible does not resolve these two contrary (not logical contradictory) positions. It simply lets both traditions stand side by side in the Bible, as two correct, but opposed, views of monarchy in Israel.

I. Two Basic Christian Positions on the Role of Politics

A. Protestant: The Protestant tradition has taken the anti-monarchic side.

1. MARTIN LUTHER held that after the fall of Adam and Eve all humans live with a human nature that is basically corrupt, and so all its works are bad. Christians live in two kingdoms: 1) the kingdom of this world, shared with the ungodly, dealing with the realities of life, like economics and politics, worked out on the basis of law, and so always inclined to evil.¹

¹ On the other hand, Luther wrote the princes of Germany asking them to "reform" the Church, thereby setting the State over the Church at least as clearly as did Henry VIII. He also wrote about the state's right, even obligation, to kill people during the Peasants' Revolt.

2) the kingdom of God, participated in only by those of faith, in which the grace of God moves Christians to acts of loving kindness.

Unfortunately, subsequent Lutheran theology took an increasingly more negative view of the kingdom of this world, basically assigning it to the realm of Satan, so that Lutheran Christians increasingly withdrew from the world of politics as a realm fatally flawed by human iniquity after the Fall. Like the anti-monarchic tradition, they saw the political realm as rejection of God's redemption through grace.

2. JOHN CALVIN held that only a theocracy could effect God's will in this world. While he theoretically believed in the separation of church and state, in practice, the Church consistory (made up of officers of the church) determined what was a civil crime and who could be a citizen of Geneva.² In effect, for Calvin civil government was as useless to bring God's justice into the world, as was Luther's kingdom of this world.

In effect, the Protestant position reduces Christian ethics to the private area of personal responsibility for one's own, or one's church's actions. The political order can observe what the church does, and perhaps so learn from it, but Protestant thought until recently has not tried to influence the political world directly.

B. Catholic: One could say that Catholics take the pro-monarchic side. But in fact, the Catholic position accepts the ambiguity of both biblical positions. Both sides are correct, and that is why they both remain in the biblical text.

1. ST. AUGUSTINE divided the world into two separate cities, the earthly city (made up of sinful pagans) and the city of God (made up of those living in

² Calvin's theocracy was established as the civil government in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which led to the infamous Salem witch-hunts.

the grace of Christian faith). He wrote that many who claimed to be members of the city of God were actually members of the earthly city, which would be condemned and pass away. But Augustine argued more than the Protestant tradition that Christians should make common cause with members of the earthly city to build a society based on laws which led to justice and peace.

2. This latter position was more forcefully developed by medieval theologians like AQUINAS and Renaissance theologians like SUAREZ and BELLARMINE. They held that because human nature after the fall remains basically good, if flawed, politics can be good and produce good fruits. They discovered a natural law in humans which leads to the good order of society and the development of virtue. Because they could distinguish between nature and grace, they found a better distinction between Church and State, according to which part of the church's mission is to be a leaven in the natural (and even sinful) order of society and government.³ Thus the Catholic tradition, with its different view of the nature of original sin and sanctification in Christ, normally stressed the political responsibility of Catholics to work in the political order for the promotion of justice and peace in society.

3. Contemporary Catholic theologians, under the influence of KARL RAHNER, have developed insights of the Catholic apologist St. Justin, and so see that even the natural order is already shot through by God's grace. Because politics itself is influenced by God's grace, it is possible that secular humanist politicians can actually be developing a society in accordance with the grace explicitly recognized by Catholics as coming from Christ.

The Catholic position holds that private morality is not enough. I may live in personal peace, provide bread for a few, and even jobs for many, but if

³ The state often overstepped its bounds and interfered in the workings of the Church; occasionally (especially in some forms of Christendom) the Church overstepped its bounds and usurped the proper functioning of the state.

hundreds of thousands cannot find work, Christ's justice does not come to the earth. It is the political, economic, and business worlds that determine wholesale justice and the conditions for Christ's justice and peace. That is why Popes of the last 120 years have elaborated a series of encyclicals and other authoritative teachings on political arrangements and economic systems which either promote or deny human dignity and rights. This is the Social Teaching of the Church, sometimes called "The Church's best kept secret."

But because not all members of civil society are believers, Catholics must articulate their positions not by quoting the bible, but by philosophical theory drawn from natural law, by legal theory drawn from precedent, and by the data of science and experience accessible to all humans of good will. It is the Catholic conviction that the best of these realms are consonant with the teaching of Christ developed in the Catholic tradition.

Finally, then, we come to the first responsibility of (Catholic) Christians: They must vote and enter into the politics by which justice is enacted in a country. That is one way of Christian leavening of the culture.

Thus far theory. But the two different Christian theories about political engagement have had a striking practical impact in the last forty years. The Protestant distrust of politics explains why in the late 1960s and early '70s, when legislating of abortion was gathering steam, the evangelical churches, which shared the Catholic Church's perspective on the immorality of abortion, left the Catholic Church alone to wage the political battle. Finally, after a decade of passivity on the issue, the evangelical Protestant Churches entered the political fray as part of the Republican strategy to build a southern and blue collar constituency. Then, after a decade of making abortion and euthanasia their single exception to their avoidance of politics, evangelical Protestants like Jim Wallis began expanding their churches' political concerns

to issues like war and social justice for the poor and alienated in America and throughout the world. Thus we have now reached the place where the Protestant tradition on political activity is approaching the age-old Catholic tradition which had emphasized a whole range of social and political concerns which had moral impact on culture. We have now arrived at a position in which all Christian churches can engage in reasoned and faith-filled debate about all the issues which impinge upon “a consistent ethic of life.”

Let me now turn to the Catholic perspective on the moral issues underlying today’s political issues in the United States of America.

II. American Bishops on Catholics’ Political Responsibility In every presidential election year, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCBB] issues a pastoral letter on the political responsibility of American Catholics.⁴

A. Why and How does the Church teach about issues of Public Policy?

The bishops begin from the obvious fact that America is in trouble. The United States is pledged to pursue “liberty and justice for all,” yet we are divided across lines of race and ethnicity, and economic inequality means that the poor simply have no access to justice. Marriage and family life are undermined in many ways, our attempts to create peace have ended in continuous wars, we are a major polluter of our global environment, and our credibility among our allies is at an all-time low. America has lost its moral compass.

At first it appears the Protestant position is correct: politics as usual always produces evil. However, the bishops argue it is not the political process that is at fault, but the underlying moral values which drive the process. They

⁴ This year’s edition is called *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*. (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007). Most of what follows derives from this document, and the () indicate its page numbers.

maintain that the Catholic tradition, which has always been a minority tradition in America, has a view of political morality which could help heal America. To do so, it must educate its own people about the nature and truth of those Catholic values, which are really basic human values. The bishops intend to help Catholics form their consciences properly about the values of Christ and the Church's social teaching so that they can raise the general level of political consciousness and help people find out how they should vote.

Note: the bishops do not tell people how to vote. They rigorously avoid taking sides in partisan politics, partly because it is counterproductive, and partly because the Church would lose its tax-exempt status if it did so. They want to help Catholics and others form their consciences correctly about the values of Christ which underlie the political choices facing America. They insist that the Church has a duty to speak on the moral issues involved in the political scene, and, because they have a duty, they also have a right to speak out. There are three foundations stones of their argument for public morality:

1. JESUS taught that love of God implies love of neighbor. In Matthew's Gospel he spelled out that love of neighbor as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, and visiting the imprisoned. Throughout the gospel he spoke of the necessity of forgiveness and reconciliation, and a large part of his own ministry was curing the blind, the deaf, the lame, and of restoring lepers to community.

Christianity from the time of Jesus to the present has enacted his vision of service of God by serving the neighbor in private acts of charity. But early on the Catholic tradition saw that private initiative was not far-reaching enough to deal effectively with these problems. As society became more complex, more complex solutions---political solutions---were required. To eradicate world hunger it is not enough merely to feed the panhandler on the street; one must

find the causes of world hunger and enact the political, social, and economic structures which can reverse these evils. As soon as the Church emerged from the catacombs and could take an active role in political life, it began to teach about the importance of Christians being involved in political life and enacting political solutions based on the values of the gospel. When the political order collapsed, the Catholic Church stepped into the breach and became the civil government (Christendom), for good and for ill. All of this clearly indicates that a Catholic has a moral responsibility to participate in political life.

2. FAITH AND REASON: Catholics do not argue a narrow faith vision derived from Jesus. They understand that unless Jesus' teachings appeal to people of other faiths, and those of no faith at all,⁵ they will not be credible enough to effect the larger political good in our world. This tradition argues that the gospel revelation enables Catholics "to see more clearly the same truths that also come to us through the gift of human reason" (3). Since the same God created the basic natures and structures of the world and the revelation of Jesus, there can be no conflict between what is accessed correctly by human reason and by faith. Further, because the Catholic Church has broad experience serving the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the uneducated, the immigrants and refugees, it can develop a consistent moral framework that addresses specific and concrete political approaches to America's problems.

3. PRUDENCE is the virtue by which humans apply the principles of faith and reason in making concrete choices in complex situations. The closer one gets to concrete political decisions, the more various circumstances affect one's judgment about the rightness or wrongness of specific actions. In Catholic

⁵ In reality, there are no people who have no faith at all. Even the most adamant atheist devoutly believes in realities other than God (the efficacy of technological reason, the essential goodness of humanity) for which there is no empirical proof. In speaking of people with no faith, we simply allow them their own self-identification..

moral thought, there are intrinsically evil actions, which can never be done because they pervert or thwart the authentic good of persons in society. Even a good purpose cannot justify an intrinsically immoral means. It is no surprise that the bishops cite abortion and euthanasia as prime examples of such actions. But they also cite human cloning, destructive research on human embryos, genocide, torture, racism, and the targeting of noncombatants in acts of terror or war (8).

Now sometimes political parties line up on opposite sides of these issues--- one party opposing abortion and euthanasia, but allowing torture and the targeting of noncombatants in war, the other tolerating abortion while opposing torture. Then it will be up to the prudent choice of the voter to calculate which program will do the most harm or the most good (11).

The bishops explicitly teach that a Catholic *may* vote for a candidate who upholds an intrinsically evil position, such as abortion or torture:

“...a voter should not use a candidate’s opposition to an intrinsic evil to justify indifference or inattentiveness to other important moral issues involving human life and dignity. There may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position may decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave reasons (11).”

Recently a Catholic priest in the L.A. Archdiocese refused Communion to Douglas Kemic, a professor at the Catholic University law school who has always opposed abortion in public, because he now says that he will vote for a specific candidate who is pro choice. In that, he is simply following the directive of the pastoral letter which I just quoted. The man appealed to Cardinal Mahoney, who commanded the priest to write Douglas a letter of apology. (If I had been the Archbishop, the priest would have had to make a public apology in the Archdiocesan newspaper, he would have been

suspended from his priestly duties for three months and commanded to get some education in Catholic social thought.)

There are other serious threats to human life and dignity which may not be always wrong, such as war, the death penalty, immigration policy, and forms of discrimination, but, absent compelling justification, must be opposed. How to get such practices removed from a country's legal system is subject to principled debate and prudent judgment, but the Church insists that Catholics must take such issues as moral issues requiring their serious attention and action. In some cases, limiting the harm done by such laws or lessening their negative impact is as much as can be done (10).

Finally, there are social and economic policies which may be morally neutral, but, as applied, have turned out to deprive humans of those things required for human decency---food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life. Catholic voters are also to consider these as moral issues influencing their vote. In a consensus document like the pastoral, the NCCB would not say so, but many bishops do think, that an accumulation of wrong policies on these issues would tip the scale against even those opposing a clearly immoral issue.

B. Seven Key Moral issues Underlying Political Choices.

The bishops then take up moral issues underlying current political issues in America. In most of these issues, their argument moves from what is more clearly bad to what is debatable but in need of moral scrutiny and correction. They begin with a general principle: “The consistent ethic of life⁶ provides a moral framework for principled Catholic engagement in political life and,

⁶ “The consistent ethic of life” is a term popularized by the late Cardinal Bernardin during the 1990s; see his *The Seamless Garment: Writings on the Consistent Ethic of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007)

rightly understood, neither treats all issues as morally equivalent nor reduces Catholic teaching to one or two issues (12).”

This principle means, as the bishops explicitly state, that Catholics *cannot be single-issue voters* (13). This conclusion was also articulated four years ago, but many Catholic priests (and even bishops who should have known better) led their congregations astray by seeming to instruct Catholic laity that they could vote only for candidates that opposed abortion and euthanasia. The bishops clearly taught then, and are teaching now, that while positions which are intrinsically evil carry much more moral weight, a Catholic should attend to all of the following seven moral issues in making their electoral choices and their political engagements.

1. THE RIGHT TO LIFE AND THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Human life, as created for a transcendent destiny in God, is sacred. The integrity and dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. The bishops teach that abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for research are direct attacks on the integrity of human life. They leave no doubt that this issue is the most important in their pastoral teaching and should carry the greatest weight with Catholic voters. But they add that the dignity of human persons also calls us to oppose torture, unjust war,⁷ genocide and racism, and the death penalty; it also calls us to overcome entrenched poverty and suffering.

⁷ Just War Theory begins with Augustine, is perfected by Aquinas, Vitoria, Suarez, and Grotius. It has Jesus’ basic pacifist presuppositions but would tolerate war on the following conditions: the war must be
1) fought for a just cause, i.e. to remedy a grave public evil already inflicted on a party;
2) declared by legitimate authority, usually a government;
3) have a strong probability of success;
4) fought proportionately, so that the destruction done by the war does not outweigh the evil to be remedied;
5) fought only as a last resort, after the means of mediation and diplomacy have been exhausted. Besides these conditions for jus ad bellum, there are also three criteria for jus in bello, moral means of conducting war.

2. HUMAN NATURE AS SOCIAL: the integrity and dignity of human life develops in relationship with others. The family, as the first and fundamental unit of society, must be defended and strengthened.⁸ In particular this means upholding parents' rights and responsibilities in caring for their children, including the right to choose their children's education.

But how we organize our society---in economics and politics, in law and policy---directly affects the common good, and the capacity of persons to develop their full potential (14). The common good is not to be understood in the British empiricist and utilitarian meaning of the term (the greatest happiness for the greatest number), but refers to the complex ordering of societal systems which enables equitable human development for all persons. The common good looks not just to economic development, but to the complex of ecological, social, political, and cultural arrangements which promote holistic human development of individuals and society as a whole.

Implementation of the common good attends to the principle of subsidiarity, according to which a larger societal institution should not interfere in what smaller institutions can do for themselves, but should engage when these smaller units cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good.

3. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES are correlatives in Catholic thought. Because humans have a duty to grow in truth and love, they have a right to education, to make free choices, and to contribute to the social and political order. "Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access those things required for human decency---food and shelter, education and employment, health care and

⁸ The bishops consider same-sex unions as undermining or redefining marriage.

housing, freedom of religion and family life” (14). In fact, the bishops assert that the right to free expression of religious belief protects all other rights.

4. **OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE:** “While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for a society is how it treats the most vulnerable in its midst” (14). Thus the bishops, following Jesus’ own practice, and respecting the human dignity of the least, oppose all forms of social Darwinism.

5. **DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS.** “The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is...a form of continuing participation in God’s creation (15).” Humans have a right to private property, productive work, just wages, and adequate benefits and security in old age. They have the right to unionize, and immigrant workers have a right to access legal status. These rights have been central to the Church’s Social Teaching since Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.

6. **SOLIDARITY** of the one human family requires the eradication of racism and the extreme poverty and disease plaguing third world countries. Pope Paul VI, “If you want peace, work for justice,” (1972 World Day of Peace Message). (Not articulated here, but a theme of various Church teachings, is the importance of developing some form of world government which balances the sovereign power of individual states.) The solidarity requested here is closely related to the understanding of humans as social, and related to all other humans. From the earliest Christian theologians this solidarity has been expressed as the common use of this world’s goods by all peoples.

7. **CARING FOR GOD’S CREATION.** Here a Christian’s concern is extended not only to all other humans, but to the rest of creation. Stewardship of God’s creation is a moral duty, exercised by living simply, and providing a

safe environment for future generations. The bishops leave largely (but not completely) untouched, the issue of sustainable development.

In concluding this section on guiding principles and key themes of Catholic political morality, the bishops repeat their call for a renewed kind of politics:

- Focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls
- Focused more on the needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong
- Focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests.

C. USCC Policy Positions on Major Issues forms the last third of the bishops' pastoral letter. We do not have the time to repeat all of it here, but I would like to highlight at least four aspects of these policy positions:

1. On human life the major part of the discussion is not on abortion and euthanasia (taken for granted), but on avoidance of war, promotion of peace, and repudiation of America's continued reliance on the death penalty.
2. On family life the bishops have returned to the Catholic insistence on a living wage, on parents' fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, and for restraint for the excesses of mass media.
3. On Social Justice the bishops advocate creation of jobs for all who can work, and for just wages and the right to unionize for collective bargaining. They want a welfare policy which would reduce poverty and dependency and strengthen family life; they want wholesale reform of the nation's health care and immigration systems; they want affordable housing and food security for all; and they highlight our nation's moral duty to care for the earth and the environment by its own energy conservation and by contributing to the sustainable development of poorer nations.

4. On Global Solidarity the bishops call on the USD government to address the scandal of poverty and underdevelopment by humanizing globalization.

III. Conclusion

Now, stepping back from the professedly Roman Catholic position articulated by the bishops, I want to highlight principles which resonate with people of other persuasions. I shall reduce the position to four points:

A. Believers in the Christian tradition derive their political morality from the teachings and actions of Jesus, as these have been developed in Christian doctrine and practice over almost 2000 years.

B. Believers have a legitimate right to derive their political judgments from their faith. But in a pluralistic society, they must make the argument to others from underlying philosophical principles and the data of social science which guide the political decisions of humans of good will.

C. The political order is not only useful, but a necessary means to achieve justice and peace, for, as Aristotle saw, humans are political animals.

Believers wanting to bring their founders' way to justice and peace to the world not only have a right, but a duty to articulate their beliefs in the political *lingua franca*, for only in the political order will human needs be met.

D. Integral to that articulation of true justice and peace are the notions of humans as

1. sacred, endowed with reason and free will in order to guide all creation to harmony and flourishing (The fate of the world is in human hands);
2. social animals who need to contribute to a common good in solidarity with all other humans and our cosmic environment;
3. beings who especially need compassion for the least, the last, and the lost of our human and ecological world.

In short, I find myself in accordance with the concluding remarks of the bishops: we need a renewed kind of politics

- Focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls
- Focused more on the needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong
- Focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests.

If this sounds too much like the rhetoric of Barack Obama, I am reminded of a trenchant remark buried at the beginning of the bishops' pastoral: Catholics are to evaluate not only candidates' policy positions, party platforms, and promises, but also *their actions* (2).