

# CHURCH SOCIAL JUSTICE INTERVENTIONS IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

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CHURCH organisations and personnel in Australia and New Zealand face unusual difficulties in speaking publicly about questions of social justice and advocacy for disadvantaged groups. It is often difficult to win a hearing in the media because of the secularism of our cultures, occasional outright anti-Catholic prejudice, and, especially at the moment, opprobrium directed against the Church as a legacy of sexual abuse cases.

In other western countries as well, there has also been a significant shift in public perception about the relationship between private and public spheres, so that religion is being edged out of the public domain into the realm of the private. This cultural shift has immense implications, not just for the Church, but for the role of government, the foundations of the welfare society, and the continuing trend to a more individualist and less regulated economics. In this context, it becomes very important that the Church regain her confidence in the public sphere and put its energies into rearticulating its moral teaching about society, the primacy of the common welfare over powerful but private interests, the need for a greater solidarity within and between countries, and especially to defend the rights of the poor and disadvantaged.

During the course of this century, the Catholic Church has tendered a rich and flourishing social teaching, which has increasingly been adapted to the specific situation of individual countries, notably through the networks of episcopal justice and peace commissions encouraged by Pope Paul VI. Pope John Paul II has further developed this social concern with his numerous and sometimes dramatic interventions, culminating in his powerful social encyclicals.

In the western world, the United States' bishops, through their pastoral statements on the arms race in 1983 and on the US economy in

1986 have given a lead to Catholics elsewhere not just in the content of their statements but perhaps more importantly by developing a more participatory process in the discussion of issues and the formulation of their statements.

In addition, the US bishops have structures to monitor government policy, make regular submissions to government enquiries and take an active part in debate about public policy. They have two great advantages over Catholics in Australia and New Zealand: they have much greater resources in finance and personnel which they can direct to these tasks; and the US culture is, at least superficially, more attuned to religious discourse and accepting of debate about religious principles.

In Australia particularly, the bishops have made a close study of how their US colleagues engage in social debate, and have attempted to adapt some of their processes, with mixed success. The unhappy circumstances surrounding the demise of the Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and its replacement by the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace and the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council fractured the Catholic social justice networks, making it difficult for the new bodies to maintain the energy and scope of their predecessors.

The most important achievement of the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace under Dr Michael Costigan has been to bring the national enquiry into the distribution of wealth in Australia to a successful conclusion, with the 1992 document, *Common wealth for the common good*. More recently, the Committee has embarked on a similar enquiry into young people in the future, and another into the role of women in the Church. None of these topics is easy, and the bishops are to be commended for undertaking them. However, while these have a social justice component, they seem to have a much wider scope, and one might ask if they are best handled by the justice

agencies. The current focus on the eradication of poverty seems a more appropriate area for the justice agencies to investigate.

An unfortunate side-effect of such major projects is that they consume so much of the energy and resources of these agencies. Without undertaking such ambitious projects, the earlier Commission for Justice and Peace had a much higher public profile, and seemed to be much more vigorous in its lobbying, networking and public advocacy. Its many statements on a wide range of issues reached an attentive national audience.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the present justice agencies are under-resourced, not surprisingly in view of the increasing pressures on Church finances. However, if the Church is to improve its work in these areas, it will need to find more resources for the task.

Part of the problem is that some dioceses have been slow to develop their own justice and peace offices, understandably so for smaller dioceses. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Church in capital cities needs to monitor more closely State government policies, particularly in economic and welfare policy. A national office cannot, nor should it be expected to, do work more appropriate for State bodies.

It is now urgent for the Church to engage more critically with the philosophy of economics and the implications of globalisation, privatisation, and deregulation, particularly by evaluating them against social outcomes. Will policies lead to increasing poverty, disparity of incomes or unemployment?

While the churches have been strong on social philosophy, a great weakness in their public profile is the dearth of people who can articulate Christian values in terms of current economic debates. The difficulty in talking the language of hard-nosed economics often means that Church statements remain on an abstract philosophical level and can appear to decision-makers as woolly and impracticable, if not as simply moralising.

The Catholic Church seems to have great difficulty developing links with professional economists. This was partly because so few Catholics were economists, but this must no longer be the case. Partly it is because many economists are highly specialised in econometrics, mathematics and computer sciences, but lack a broad general foundation in



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the humanities and social philosophy. I recall the late Professor Dick Spann from the Department of Government at the University of Sydney lamenting that economic students in the 1970s had little opportunity to explore social philosophy. He feared that they would not be able to marry economic policies to desirable social policies as a result. The dominance of the so-called 'economic rationalism' may bear him out.

It would pay great dividends if Church agencies could engage the cooperation not just of professional economists, but also develop networks among business people who are concerned to promote concern for justice but are also aware of the practical difficulties involved.

#### *The extent of direct Church involvement in social debate*

The question to what extent Church organisations or the bishops should be directly involved in issues of justice is a difficult one to which there can be no catch-all answers, for social principles must be mediated through social analysis and prudential judgments, where there are usually various legitimate views. Historically, the Church has sometimes made mistakes in this area by excess as well as by omission, and appropriate responses may be unclear at the time.

For instance, who can doubt that the Church should have taken much more decisive action against anti-Semitism before World War II? This grave omission is only totally clear with

hindsight. On the other hand, sometimes the Church has erred by excess, as in the anti-Modernist campaigns early in the century and attempts to condemn Christian Democracy and the trade unions.

In responding to issues of social justice, Christ gives the Church no guarantee of infallibility. However, it is critical that the Church clearly defend human rights, promote justice and denounce injustice. On the level of social principles, problems are usually not so immediate, but on the detailed application of principles, difficulties abound. For this reason, the Australian bishops in their 1992 statement on the distribution of wealth, *Common wealth for the common good*, followed the US bishops in distinguishing between the level of principle where the Church spoke formally as teacher, and where the bishops spoke prudentially, without demanding obedience to the detail of their analysis, but calling for greater effort at solving problems.

In Australia, such distinctions have not always been clear, as became evident in the disagreements among the bishops during the Labor Split from 1954. The distinctions were also involved in the debates over the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in the 1980s. It is thus extremely important to be clear about them if any Church organisations acting for justice wish to avoid unnecessarily divisive debate and fragmentation within the Church.

The US bishops in 1995 issued a 32-page document, *Political responsibility*, which highlighted some significant dimensions in how the Church should engage in public debate. It stressed that 'religious voices in public life must persuade, not just proclaim, and that the test of our witness is not only how strongly we believe, but how effectively we persuade and translate our beliefs into action.'

The challenge for the Church is to be principled without being ideological, to be political without being partisan, to be civil without being soft, to be involved without being used. Our moral framework does not easily fit the categories of right or left... We are called to measure every party and movement by how its agenda touches human life and human dignity.<sup>1</sup>

While recognising that Catholics have diverse political and ideological commitments, the US bishops insisted that all were called to 'ensure that political life serves the common good and

the human person'.<sup>2</sup> They stressed that individual acts of charity were necessary, but not enough. Action to remove poverty, injustice and hunger 'involves the institutions and structures of society, the economy, and politics'.<sup>3</sup>

They also stressed that the Church must encourage persons and organisations to participate more actively in social and political affairs, since a healthy democracy requires the intelligent and wide participation of its citizens.

The Church's role in the political order includes the following:

- educating the faithful regarding the teachings of the Church and their responsibilities;
- analysing issues for their social and moral dimensions;
- measuring public policy against gospel values;
- participating with other concerned parties in debate over public policy;
- speaking out with courage, skill, and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice, and the life of the Church in society.<sup>4</sup>

I would suggest the following pointers to guide action:

1. As a general principle, Church organisations should speak on specific issues mainly where there are important moral issues at stake or in defence of the Church.
2. Following the thinking of John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain, the Second Vatican Council consolidated the view, which had been contested, that Catholic action in the civil sphere should:
  - a) generally be that of Catholics acting on their own initiative, with the support and training in moral principles and decision-making from the Church;
  - b) in special cases, Church leaders or organisations may intervene more directly, as long as they make clear whether they are either
    - i) *speaking with their full Church authority* and hence claiming the adherence of Catholics, e.g. against killing the innocent in war; rejecting the doctrine of class war; or
    - ii) *speaking prudentially*, i.e. assessing a situation to the best of their ability, but commending their views to the consciences of their hearers, and expecting they will evaluate what is said not necessarily as an authoritative religious teaching but as an invitation to serious and conscientious consideration of a particular

- matter. Such prudential intervention relies on the evidence adduced rather than the authority of the Church, e.g., questioning the morality of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence; criticising the social effects of various economic policies. In practice, this distinction may be difficult to make in some circumstances.
3. With regard to Church organisations or religious congregations speaking in the secular arena, it seems to me that these points are critical:
    - a) As the 1971 Synod on Justice said, the whole Church must consider the transformation of the world in justice as an integral part of evangelisation.
    - b) Among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Church must respect the vocation of the laity as primarily responsible for the transformation of the secular world.
    - c) The role of formal Church organisations (like religious congregations and educational bodies) is to help form the religious and moral sensibilities of the people, and to stimulate training and information for social transformation, especially about the demands of the Gospel, value formation and character training.
    - d) In special circumstances, where issues of injustice demand urgent public attention, Church organisations may be obliged to speak out strongly, invoking their credibility as religious bodies, as when religious groups in the Philippines and Latin America denounced death squads, social exploitation etc At times the Church has been the only major social institution able to speak on behalf of the victims of dictatorships or oppressive ruling elites.
    - e) In most circumstances, where issues are not so clear or where Church organisations have no special competence, the task may fall more to Church personnel to speak on the basis of their own competence and expertise.
  4. It seems to follow from this that the role of Church organisations in the public forum should ideally be somewhat limited in a society like Australia's, where special interest groups can readily speak for themselves. However, if groups or individuals suffer in a way which needs urgent attention, Church groups may have a duty to speak out, provided:
    - a) they have people with the competence and experience to justify their intervention;
    - b) they are prepared to undertake the discipline of information-gathering and lobbying, and win credibility and support from similar groups and agencies;
    - c) they make clear that they are not speaking for the Church as a whole but for themselves, and advance their arguments in a way appropriate in a secular society.

*Some suggestions:*

1. I am arguing that the primary role of Church organisations in the field of social justice should be educative and formative, helping to empower laity to act on their own responsibility. There is nothing new in this, but it needs to be recognised more clearly and implemented more vigorously. It would appear in recent decades that an activist trend in Church organisations has distracted somewhat from the task of preparing the laity to act in the social arena on their own responsibility. Such educational work does not have the drama or excitement of activist work but is in many ways more fundamental and should be presupposed when Catholics undertake social interventions in the course of their secular careers.  
In addition, we should recognise that the Church is still in a very privileged position in relation to the moral formation of the young, a position which is widely accepted in the community. Church schools have not always used well the opportunity to open up for their students the social implications of the Gospel, though many do make this a high priority. Schools especially can help link the core message of Jesus with personal experiences of disadvantage and the social problems of our day.
2. Church personnel and members must continue to understand better the content and development of Church social principles and practice. We Australians are usually good on practical things but not so good on thinking ideas through thoroughly, and understanding our history or tradition. Particularly we need to be able to bring alive the social implications of the Gospel, and to understand fairly but critically how this

message has been lived in history. If work for justice is to be effective, it must be intelligent and informed, hence the need for continual education in this area. It would also be helpful if the Church could do more to encourage scholarship in this area.

3. Church organisations and particularly religious congregations should encourage some of their own people to specialise more carefully in fields of justice education or work, according to their own charisma and areas of specialisation. It is encouraging but long overdue that nursing orders, for instance, have been training some of their people in bio-ethics. Sometimes in the past Church organisations have been arenas for gifted amateurs. It is readily apparent that a more professional approach is needed today. Church organisations can also sponsor research or education in fields of social justice, e.g. by providing scholarships for serious study.
4. Where Church organisations have specialist people, they should be supported in work of public advocacy where appropriate. Groups specialising in social work, for instance, may be well placed to participate with kindred organisations in lobbying and policy analysis. Judgment is needed to decide when advocacy is best done by individuals or by organisations.
5. The Catholic Church's welfare work is truly extraordinary. It was reported that in 1995 the Australian Church spent \$250 million on

welfare and poverty alleviation in Australia and overseas, not including what was spent on health and education. This indicates an enormous store of practical experience about what is happening to disadvantaged people. Some of these Church organisations are very good at lobbying government, advising the bishops on social policy, and at co-operating with other welfare agencies. However, the question is: could they be doing more to influence public policy? If so, how should they develop their policy analysis, lobbying and roles in public debate?

The Church has a special role to live out and articulate the values of the Gospel. How to do this is not always clear, however, and at times there may be something to be said for muddling along in ambiguous circumstances, trying as best we can to help people, share resources, and witness to faith, love and fairness. But if the Church is to carry out its task to the best of its ability, it will need to make more effective use of its rich resources.

#### NOTES

1. *Political responsibility: proclaiming the Gospel of life, protecting the least among us, and pursuing the common good*. Reflections on the 1996 elections by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference (Washington DC: US Catholic Conference, 1995), 6.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.