

**ST LUKE'S CALL TO BE GOOD NEWS TO ALL THE EARTH:
INFORMING THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE OF AUSTRALIANS**

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The story is told of a working-class Irish-American woman who had always voted Democrat. Her son had been successful at college and moved up the social scale into an upper middle-class status. At election time he asked his mother for whom she had voted. She shot back: 'Straight Democrat'. Her exasperated son replied: 'You know, Mom, if Jesus came back to earth and ran as a Republican, you'd vote against him.' She snapped back: 'Oh hush! Why would He change His party after all these years?'¹

The line between religion and politics is sometimes hard to draw.

My talk tonight begins with the emphasis in St Luke's Gospel on the social implications of faith. It is a message that Pope John Paul II has constantly tried to highlight, most remarkably in making Jesus' mission statement in Luke 4: 22-30 the centrepiece for the Year of the Great Jubilee in 2000.

This is not just another episode about the ministry of Jesus. Luke makes the passage the heart and soul of his Gospel, highlighting it as the central mission statement of Jesus. You recall the incident of Jesus in the synagogue reading from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour [the Jubilee].*

The passage does not deny the personal and other dimensions of faith, but emphasises Christ's acute concern for the 'poor', those suffering and oppressed, powerfully implying that social concern and responsibility for one another is not just a metaphor but is also essential to faith.

How might we interpret this critical passage in our circumstances today? I would suggest that we see this passage as a Gospel imperative to help nurture, inform and activate the social conscience of our people and of the nation, by engaging in a deeper conversation with our contemporaries, drawing on all the wonderful resources available to us, from our own social traditions as well as from our history and culture, the social sciences and disciplines available.

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¹ E. J. Dionne Jr., 'There is no Catholic Vote – and it's important', in Margaret Steinfels. *American Catholics & Civil Engagement*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 251.

It was no accident that Pope John Paul II extolled the Jubilee theme in the year of the Great Jubilee 2000, and wrote so movingly about its implications in his 2001 encyclical, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*. He was particularly insistent about ‘our commitment to history’ as Christians, about the duty to help fashion a more caring and humane world. He also highlighted the Last Judgment scene from Matthew’s Gospel, a most astonishing parable, when God will judge us not on our piety, but on our practical solidarity with the homeless, the sick, the hungry, in a word, ‘the poor’, to use the code word of the Bible. According to the Pope, the whole credibility of the Christian message hinges on our taking to heart the message of this parable.

Why does the Pope so strongly insist on this social dimension? Because in history many Christians have given an excessively spiritual interpretation to the Gospels, without realising fully the social implications embedded in them. The Pope is particularly keen to overcome the split that developed in the consciousness of many Catholics in the past between the realm of faith and that of secular world of work and society.

The Vatican Council in the great and mighty charter document, *The Church in the Modern World*, declared that this split between the world of faith and social responsibility was one of the most serious errors in the Church. Its opening words trumpeted *a call to engagement*, not disengagement, with the problems of the contemporary world.

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts (par. 1).

The Pope recognises of course that the world of religious devotion is highly complex, searching for ways to express communion with God. But he does not wish to see piety become an escape from real life responsibilities, or still more, to construct an indulgent fantasy world that ignores the need to work for peace and justice in society and the world as a whole. He is insistent that concern for social justice and solidarity with struggling people is an ‘essential’ part of the evangelising mission of the Church.

Indeed John Paul on 29 October 2004 called for a new social activism among Catholics as he commended the new *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that he had directed be prepared. He saw it helping ‘Christians in their daily commitment to make the world more just’, and based on ‘an authentic, solidaristic humanism.’ He especially emphasised the role of *lay Christians* in shining the light of the Gospel on ‘the realities of work, economy, politics’, peace-making, ‘justice and friendship among peoples.’

In other words, concern for social justice is not an optional extra, or an ‘add-on’, but springs from the heart of the Gospel. It is a direct response to Jesus’ call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, not just be an individual response of charity, but by how we organise society and institutions to carry out these tasks in a more effective and universal way.

Hence it is puzzling to hear some talk that concern for social justice can become a rival to the Gospel, as if they were opposed. It is true, of course, that some people might fail to make the link between the Gospel message and concern for social justice. But part of our evangelising mission is to make those links transparently clear, and indeed to stress that any sense of God or the Gospel that ignores or downplays concern for the poor and social justice is a distortion and perhaps even a betrayal of the Christian message.

Instead of fearing some rivalry between concern for social justice and evangelisation, in our conversation about public issues we could be helping open a window into the heart of the Gospel. Far from social justice being an obstacle to faith, it can be seen a privileged lens of insight into God's passionate concern for human wellbeing. In my view, it would be a great mistake to trivialise or downplay concern for social justice, especially among younger people. It is not a mistake either John Paul II or the Vatican Council has made.

As John Paul said his World Day of Peace message in 1998:

The distinctive mark of the Christian, today more than ever, must be love for the poor, the weak, the suffering. Living out this demanding commitment requires a total reversal of the alleged values which make people seek only their own good: power, pleasure, the unscrupulous accumulation of wealth.

Concern for justice, peace and equity in society is one of the most obvious and powerful means for many people to access what true belief is all about.

My central theme tonight is to stress that those of us in the Catholic Church, in close dialogue and collaboration with the other Christian denominations, have an urgent contribution to make to informing the social conscience of our communities: that the great mysterious presence sustaining the universe, that we call God as if it were clear what that word means, is mightily concerned about our human wellbeing. So insistent is God to convince us of this, we believe, that in Jesus this mysterious presence takes on human flesh, and lays down his life in an astonishing act of solidarity with all the 'poor' of the earth, all those suffering and searching for life and justice, truth and meaning. Jesus asks us to share a similar concern for one another.

This is a vision of God that I suspect is attractive not just to Christians, but one that people from other religions could largely endorse, and even non-believers would find it heartening. It demolishes the dualism in western history that has been the source of so much confusion. God takes delight in the full flourishing of our beings, and all that is genuinely human is precious to him. Hence there need be no polarisation between the secular and the sacred. On the one hand, the implication of the Incarnation is that everything is suffused with grace, yet on the other hand, the world retains its own secularity and autonomy as God intended.

Hence we Christians must engage in the social transformation of the world, inspired by values in Scripture certainly, but not in an imperial or manipulative way, and certainly not by trying to impose religious beliefs on others. We are part of the wider public conversation in society, a conversation which encourages all to join the dutiful search for the human good and the truth about human wellbeing, and prizes dutiful conscience above all. In this free and earnest pursuit of moral truth, we honour primacy of conscience as the most sacred core of our beings before God.

Though the major world religions have different perceptions of God and their belief systems have developed almost in parallel universes, as it were, we can reverence the religious traditions and search of all. While not ignoring the uniqueness of these religious traditions, we need to promote the conversation among them so we can further the human good together, on the basis of reason, expertise, investigation and good judgment. Religious faith does not substitute for human wisdom. It is not some sort of 'magic bullet' providing automatic solutions to difficult problems. It invites us to use our intelligence as well as commitment.

I love that word ‘conversation’. It implies mutual respect among people, a willingness to listen and learn, to be open to different and even opposed points of view. I imagine us as a family gathered around God’s kitchen table, discussing robustly enough, but earnestly seeking the truth about our human wellbeing, and knowing that we are all precious in God’s sight.

It was no accident that Pope Paul VI issued his first encyclical in 1964 on dialogue. He was concerned about the acrimony in debates in the Church itself, and wanted to set some parameters for courteous discussion, even if people disagree about things they hold passionately. Even more so in the wider conversation in the secular culture, we must speak with courtesy and respect always, taking every effort to avoid appearing strident or arrogant.

Developing our social conscience

I will situate my reflection tonight against the backdrop of recent events, notably the federal election last month, and attempt to identify how adequately we have been addressing questions of social conscience by identifying some strengths we have, and also some weaknesses and what we can do about them.

Honouring politics as a vocation

Australia is extremely fortunate to have a strong democratic system encouraging robust political debate, and Catholics and other Christians are well represented right across the political spectrum. I do not want to speak here in party-partisan fashion. Those active in political activities make an essential contribution to keeping our democracy operating. It is important for us to honour the nobility of the vocation of politics as our nation searches for ways to realise the common good. We should be supportive to those involved in politics and their families, and also encouraging to younger people considering political involvement.

We know of course that no political platforms are ever ideal, as they represent compromises among various views and interest groups to maximise their electoral appeal. There are good and also less desirable features in most political platforms. Moreover, citizens will weight those positions differently. It is understandable then, that the Church tries to distance itself from any partisan intervention in elections, and strives not to endorse one party against another. We took a wrong turn on this matter half a century ago, and don’t want to make that mistake again.

Nevertheless, as Christians we cannot wash our hands of the difficult moral issues underlying many political decisions. It is part of our responsibility both individually as citizens to take part in political debate, and as a church to shed what light we can on the moral issues involved. This can be a sensitive matter, and often contentious. When to speak out publicly and when not to is a matter for careful judgment, especially by Church officials. Sometimes more can be gained by patient, private contact or negotiation than by public confrontation or debate.

But Church officials and organisations have a duty to speak out when they have the competence and role to do so. Hence we accept that welfare agencies, such as the St Vincent de Paul Society or Centacare, will undertake advocacy for their constituents and take part in the public debate.

It is true that it is particularly difficult today for the Church to win a public hearing. But we must not allow that to silence us on issues where we have a duty to speak. Historians will in time examine the role of the churches and their members to see if they were prepared to speak the truth about key social issues, with due prudence of course, but forthrightly if need be.

Individuals or independent associations of lay people inspired by Christian social principles are of course free to make their own decisions and act on their own responsibility. Why do we not have more of these associations?

Unsettling aspects of the election

The conduct of the recent federal election has been profoundly disturbing and unsettling for many of us, however we voted, as various commentators have noted. In the *Age* last weekend (30 October), one columnist (Shaun Carney) wrote that controversies over ‘such things as propriety, ethics and honesty are... of little concern to the great mass of voters’, and the fact that Australia was misled into war ‘did not figure in our election campaign’. He concluded that ‘most Australians are saying with some force that they are not overly concerned about process just as long as their economic circumstances aren’t being disturbed’.

Carney may be right, but I would suggest another interpretation. I suspect that a majority of voters returned the Coalition government because of their concerns about economic management, but that even many Coalition voters are nevertheless deeply disturbed about the government’s handling of other issues. I meet such people often. In my view, it would be a serious mistake for the newly elected government to interpret its win as a mandate for some extremely contentious policies. This new term of office gives the government the opportunity to review its foreign policies and dealings with asylum seekers especially. This may well be Mr Howard’s last chance to demonstrate to what extent history should see him as a skilful populist or a genuine statesman.

Unfortunately I think it is true that the election process has deepened the cynicism and disenchantment among many. Political campaigns are of their nature tendentious, but the blatant vote-buying and financial profligacy were unprecedented.

Major issues that should have been high on the agenda hardly appeared at all:

- the mushrooming levels of foreign debt;
- the casualisation of much of the workforce, reducing opportunity and equity for large numbers of workers;
- continuing substantial unemployment in rural and regional areas;
- reconciliation with indigenous Australians; and
- the boom in house prices that has triggered excessive household borrowing and undermined housing affordability for lower-income groups and for future generations, with disturbing implications for an even lower birth rate.

Many church and community groups were shocked particularly by two issues:

- that the plight of asylum seekers was so down-played by the major parties, with no notable change of policy in sight;
- and that the Iraq war did not become a decisive election issue, though the government was repeatedly charged with failing to tell the truth and deceiving the nation about Iraq.

Asylum seekers

As you would be aware, many church and community groups throughout Victoria, in parishes and schools too, have become actively involved in supporting and advocating more just treatment for asylum seekers. Church and other people supporting asylum seekers have given many hundreds of talks to various groups, explaining how the system works and how cruel and inhumane it is, to use the words of the Catholic bishops not long ago.

These activities have stirred the social conscience of many, helping them see how the public has been misled. No one I know working with asylum seekers is in any doubt that these people have been the victims of cynical political opportunism. Many Australians have been contributing regular donations to help feed and house those asylum seekers who have been released into the community awaiting reconsideration of their pleas for asylum, but who are denied any public source of income or support, and not allowed to work. How are they even to eat? The government has simply absolved itself of responsibility for these people, and thrown them on the charity of church and community groups for everything, including housing, food and clothing. Many other asylum seekers are still behind razor wire or under detention, including significant numbers of children, some for over four years.

After years of advocacy and patient lobbying with governments, people in the church and community agencies have been deeply shocked by the slow progress on this issue, and by the apathy of much of the general public about it. This is not just a criticism of the government, but of the Labor Party as well.

The Iraq war

The Iraq war also posed urgent moral questions for the electorate. As you know, the Pope, top Vatican officials and bishops' conferences around the world strongly opposed the war, though many of our church leaders in Australia seemed slow to follow their lead. I realise that the application of moral principles is complex, and Catholics had a duty to evaluate the evidence and make their own conscience decisions. Yet it is now clear that public opinion was misled; political leaders in Australia, the United States and Britain repeatedly made claims that were untrue; and that in the view of Pope and overwhelmingly of the bishops worldwide, the war did not meet the moral criteria for a just war.

I believe Australia as a nation ominously crossed a line here. For the first time in our history as western democracies we went to war against the protests of the mainstream churches, which have been key custodians of the just war tradition establishing the moral legitimacy of war. An extra responsibility fell on Australia since we were one of only three invading powers in Iraq. Our government could have exercised a moderating influence on the United States. Instead it consistently encouraged intervention. Fortunately no Australians have so far been killed there, but nevertheless Australia shares in the responsibility for the reconstruction of Iraq.

The opposition of the Catholic and other churches to the war in Iraq is not based on hindsight. It was based on moral principle and a careful evaluation of outcomes judged likely from the evidence available at the time. Before the war I examined the case against war in a pamphlet *War on Iraq: Is it just?* published by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. Copies of that pamphlet are available afterwards tonight.

The pamphlet drew from expert opinion that was readily available in the public arena, including from UN weapons inspectors and specialist research institutions in Britain and the United States. It denied that Iraq posed a threat because of its alleged weapons of mass

destruction, found there was no evidence of a link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, and argued that the just war moral criteria strongly opposed the legitimacy of a war. Some of the fearful consequences of a western invasion of Iraq have unfortunately been borne out, as Iraq teeters on the brink of prolonged civil strife or even civil war. My point is that the truth was readily available for those who wanted to see it.

Last week you would have seen reports of a detailed US study, published in the prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*, claiming that on a conservative estimate more than 100,000 civilians, mainly women and children, had been killed in the fighting in Iraq, mainly from US bombing and shelling. One can understand why our government should want to play down such claims, but public opinion in Australia seems remarkably unconcerned about our moral responsibility in this. In terms of the loss of innocent lives and the escalating financial cost, the situation in Iraq has deteriorated further in recent months.

What can we learn as Christians from the Iraq imbroglio?

This: as a community in Australia we have neglected to master the just war tradition, which the Catholic Church historically did so much to fashion as a means of constraining war and violence. Where were our numerous intellectuals, able to take part in the debate and help form public opinion on the moral issues involved? Some did of course, but they were too few. It came as a great surprise to me how thin were our resources in the Catholic Church, despite some outstanding exceptions.

Mercifully some church leaders and some of the Catholic bishops took a strong stand, notably Archbishop Frank Carroll of Canberra-Goulburn, president of the episcopal conference, and his assistant, Bishop Pat Power, along with Bishop Bill Morris of Toowoomba, then chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Cardinal Pell later, and a few others. The Catholic bishops as a whole spoke only very late in the day, and only a few weeks before the war declared their support for the US bishops who had opposed the war six months earlier.

And why do we have so few lay people with expertise in these moral issues that are so critical for our nation? Why do our universities and theological colleges not give more attention to courses in these areas? Why aren't students clamoring for such courses? This is surely part of our core business as Christians.

We need to do much more to develop our expertise in these areas, by encouraging study opportunities for people, providing scholarships, and encouraging informed lay people to become more involved and vocal on their own initiative.

Ignoring global poverty and hunger

But perhaps the most challenging issue is that of development in the third world. Informed discussion about global hunger and poverty is the most the most significant *conversation we are refusing to have* in Australia. It nowhere figured in the last election, and unfortunately even the churches in recent years have failed to mobilise public opinion on the range of issues where we could make a real difference.

I have no doubt that one of the most significant things we could do as Christians is to help put global development back on the public agenda. Some of you will recall the Action for World Development movement in the early 1970s, that brought together perhaps hundreds of thousands of Christians in discussion groups across the nation. Should we attempt that again? What else can we do to help shape public opinion in helpful ways?

The irony is that we have a story to tell about development that is basically astonishingly good news: the world can abolish hunger and the worst forms of poverty everywhere within a matter of decades, if we set our minds to it. This is the first time in history we have been able to say this. We have the resources and know what has to be done. What we lack is the political will.

This is not just my romantic dreaming, but is the view of leading development economists in the United Nations and elsewhere. As the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, wrote recently: 'What makes this widespread hunger even more of a tragedy is the way we have come to accept it... as essentially unpreventable'. Another leading economist, Paul Streeten, wrote some years ago: 'It is the fact that hunger today is unnecessary that makes its continued existence so shocking.' In his view, 'ultimately, the problem of eradicating hunger is a political problem rather than a nutritional or economic one.'

These are not isolated or eccentric voices, but reflect the consensus among development planners and economists. So much so that the United Nations developed its Millennium Development Goals to halve the extent of world hunger and the worst forms of poverty by 2015, only ten years away now. In 2000, 189 nations signed on to this historic project, including Australia. But instead of doubling our aid and other assistance, Australia has done almost nothing extra. Instead, Australia's overseas aid languishes at 0.26% of Gross National Income, half the percentage of 30 years ago. We are turning our backs on a decisive push to save millions of lives and lift hundreds of millions out of the most degrading poverty. Yet there is barely a whisper of our shameful neglect in our media.

Consider the contrast with the United Kingdom, where the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, have made this a key political and humanitarian issue, and are driving the national agenda to support the Millennium Goals. Why are our Australian political leaders not so inspired?

As the Australian head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn said in a visit to Melbourne early this year, behind the threat of terrorism lies the injustice and cruelty of third-world poverty, a breeding ground of resentment and anger against the West. Much of the threat from terrorism would diminish if the richer nations could demonstrate an effective mobilisation of resources to help eradicate hunger and poverty. The UN Millennium Goals have provided a detailed plan for what must be done. How can we in the churches, in alliance with other community and humanitarian organisations, help put development on the political agenda in Australia?

Our wider task: humanising global capitalism

The drama of third-world development is part, a huge part admittedly, of the wider challenge of humanising global capitalism. The Church and the West have emerged victorious against the threat from Soviet communism, but must re-energise their efforts to tame the forces of capitalism reshaping the global economy.

The churches faced various challenges to their social thinking over the past century, from laissez-faire capitalism late in the 19th century, to extreme forms of socialism, Marxism-Leninism, Fascism, Nazism, and numerous other ideologies. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discrediting of communism, the main challenge comes from a resurgent capitalism, as Pope John Paul II warned against, especially in what is called 'neoliberalism' which is dominant in much US thinking, including among the neo-conservatives around

President George Bush. We have seen the revival of some of the worst features of the old unregulated capitalism that Pope Leo XIII and Pius XI condemned.

The conflict with neoliberalism

In my view, Catholic and other Christian thinkers have not been vigorous enough in critiquing the philosophy underlying neoliberalism or, as it is sometimes termed in Australia, 'Economic Rationalism', with its excessive individualism and faith in a minimally regulated market. Neoliberalism in the United States has been driving changes to welfare policy, industrial and wage policies, and redistributing wealth to the upper-income elites. It has also been influencing policy changes in Australia, though not nearly to the same extent as in the USA.

To counter this, the churches need urgently to draw on their rich philosophical resources, particularly in defence of social and distributive justice, and contribute to developing a more communitarian view of policy development. The Catholic Church has great depths of resources to draw on, including the social encyclicals and episcopal statements of the last century. Various papal and Vatican initiatives have been very important in the international conversation about world peace and disarmament, development, human rights and social justice, but little of this percolates through to Australia. How to we encourage a more mature engagement with these major social issues by Australians?

The new Catholic Right

Of particular concern is the emergence of a new Catholic Right that is closely aligned to the policies of the Bush Administration, and has tried to give an interpretation of Catholic social philosophy to make it more compatible with US neoliberalism. Particularly prominent have been Michael Novak, George Weigel and Richard John Neuhaus, connected with well-funded right-wing think tanks and publishing houses. They have also enjoyed considerable entrée in high political circles in Australia.

Michael Novak has been particularly important since he is regarded as one of the central figures on economic thought among the Washington neo-conservatives. Novak had earlier been sharply critical of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI as well as of the US bishops for their social and political views, and has maintained his opposition to the mainstream US Catholic social commentators.

The fact that Novak had adopted a highly partisan political role became clearer when he was invited to Rome by the US Ambassador to argue the case for armed intervention in Iraq against the views of the Pope, leading Vatican officials and bishops' conferences around the world. Weigel, who is well known for his biography of John Paul II, also campaigned strongly for the case for war in tandem with Novak and Neuhaus. They are of course entitled to their views, but it would be naïve to ignore their pivotal political role as part of the continuing efforts by the Republican Party to capture more of the Catholic vote.

There is little doubt that well-funded groups in the United States were alarmed by the opposition from the Catholic and other mainstream US churches to the defence and foreign policies of the Reagan Administration, and have developed campaigns to undermine the positions of these church leaders by promoting institutes and publications more conducive to conservative political interests. Hence it seems to me we are witnessing the emergence of US versions of the court theologians of old. This is a new phenomenon for us in Australia, who have assumed in the past that theologians were disinterested academics or church practitioners.

It will be interesting to see if there is an attempt to politicise the growing but still small evangelical moments in Australia, along the lines of the new Christian Right in the USA. I think this unlikely at the moment. Australian culture and traditions are averse to using overt religious rhetoric in politics, and are more egalitarian than in the USA, though this may be changing. Those of us in the mainstream churches need to invite evangelicals into the conversation about social justice, peace and inter-religious dialogue.

Sympathy for the underdog, which is also strongly reinforced by the mainstream churches, especially in Scripture and recent developments in church social teaching, will not readily be displaced by any slickly marketed gospel of success and individual prosperity. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the power of the mass media, especially if heavily influenced by conservative big business interests, to change the culture to promote competitive individualism, and try to find some religious legitimation for this.

What can we do?

Let us begin by recognising that we have considerable and privileged resources at our disposal. We Christians have a long history of engagement with social issues and considerable legitimacy to speak on them. For many years we have tried to form the social conscience of our own adherents first of all, but indirectly that of the wider society through all the range of activities in schools and higher education; hospitals, health and aged care; social welfare organizations; and parishes, with their day-to-day pastoral care. The churches continue to have a massive institutional presence in Australia, and overall constitute the largest private employers.

But many of these institutions are going through various forms of transition, in personnel and structure, resulting in some urgent issues affecting their identity and sense of mission. How does one maintain a clear religious identity when many staff do not share that religious allegiance, or who come from a secular or non-Christian background? Our religious institutions in general have an enviable reputation for quality of care and competence, but how do we clarify our mission in terms that everyone can be comfortable with?

These are pressing issues, and we have work to do here. I would refer you an excellent treatment of them by Peter Steinfels in his 2003 book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (Simon & Schuster). I would also recommend Margaret Steinfels subsequent two-volume work, *American Catholics & Civic Engagement: A Distinctive Voice* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). Though these discuss the situation in the United States, there is much that is relevant to our own difficulties and opportunities.

Be alert to new opportunities

A friend of mine, not a Catholic, indeed an agnostic, is an economist who is very interested in the development of the Catholic social tradition and indeed is writing a critique of it. But he often berates me because his children, quite some years ago, went to Catholic schools but, he says, they heard nothing about Catholic social teaching. He becomes quite agitated about this, saying ‘What on earth are you doing that your schools are not introducing students to this marvellous tradition about social justice, equity and human rights.’

What can I say? I would like to be able to tell him that we were doing much better now, making concern about social justice a central part of our religious education. I am aware that some schools are making exemplary efforts to do this. In addition, as I saw at a Catholic

education conference in Melbourne last week, schools and teachers are trying imaginatively to respond to a wider range of pastoral and welfare issues emerging among families and students. This is very encouraging, and indeed inspiring, though there is a long way to go in practice yet.

I find it paradoxical that my economist friend, as an agnostic, should be so attracted to the ideas and philosophy of the Catholic social tradition, but that many Catholics still seem perplexed by it or know little about it. I am reminded of the famous story about the Catholic Democratic contender for the White House in 1928, Al Smith, who was being attacked on sectarian grounds that he would try to impose the ideas contained in the papal social encyclicals. Finally he sat down with his aides and asked: 'Tell me one thing: what is an encyclical?'

He is not alone, even today. The tragedy is that we Christians have a tremendous resource in the Scriptures and our traditions, but instead of breaking it open as a resource to share with others, often we have ignored it, and scandalously betrayed our values and principles. Pope John Paul himself apologised during the Jubilee 2000 for the mistakes and betrayals of the Gospels during the Church's long history.

It is surely not a bad thing for us as Christians to be humble before the judgment of history, and even more so of God of course. Yet despite all the misfortunes of recent years, I would like to suggest that this is a time of great opportunity to deepen our understanding of our own identity as Christians and of the responsibility we share with others for our human future.

I do not know how widespread this is, but I find a great openness among people from the various Christian traditions together to put our minds to the task of shaping our history, to extend the range of conversation about how faith bears on social and civil issues, to collaborate in joint projects wherever possible, and more recently to expand our conversation with people from other religions, including Islam.

I find a fresh interest among groups of academics, including those in political science and economics, especially in the communitarian social philosophy that has been a feature of Catholic social thinking. Many academics are very concerned about philosophical assumptions underlying various economic theories, and especially about the relativism and individualism apparent in western countries.

Others are aware that the world religions are enjoying a resurgence, and that a new dialogue of civilisations is essential if we are to secure peace and prosperity for everyone. The Catholic Church bears a special responsibility here, particularly in developing a new relationship with the world of Islam as well as of Judaism. Pope John Paul II has set an example for us, inviting the leaders of world religions to pray together at Assisi, himself praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and even visiting a Mosque to pray.

Can you mobilise public opinion without becoming political?

There was recently some comment on the emergence of Christian political groups and candidates, notably Family First with its connections with the Assembly of God church. Some have expressed a fear that this might signal the rise of religious fundamentalism in Australian politics, as a much smaller version of the intrusion of the evangelical Right into US politics. Others have argued that there must be strict separation of religion and politics, which must be kept firmly secular. Religious beliefs must be kept private, and not imposed on others.

Let me say several things about this. First, most people would agree, and certainly the mainline churches would hold, that moral views cannot be lifted straight out of the Scriptures and interpolated into our contemporary world. To give some obvious instances, the Scriptures oppose usury (interest-taking) and accept the institution of slavery. But no sane person in Australia is likely to advocate such practices today. Other issues are more complex and contentious: e.g., divorce, the death penalty and abortion.

Second, Western democratic processes were designed as a means to moderate religious conflict and institute mechanisms for arriving at as widely accepted policies and laws, based on free and reasoned debate to determine what is in the best interests of the community as a whole. The democratic system, as we know, is not perfect, but it is the best option available.

There is, further, a difference between morality and legislation. While we might argue strongly on moral grounds for certain policies, some practices must be tolerated for the greater good. The classic case concerns prostitution. The issue of abortion shares some similarities, though I am encouraged to see that the public conversation on this seems to have opened up again.

Governments must legislate for public order, but where communities are deeply divided on a policy, and a basic consensus is lacking, it is difficult for governments to act without a sharp political reaction. In such cases, the churches must tolerate what is politically feasible, and try to keep open a constructive public conversation in an effort to influence public opinion.

Third, all people are entitled to hold their own religious or philosophical views about the how they envisage the human good and politics, and it would be very foolish of any church to demand or try to impose particular policies in the name of their religious beliefs. In my view, we will never be able to achieve an overarching concept of THE Good, such as Aristotle held, but must leave people free in conscience to determine what this good is. But we can go a long way to achieving a reasonable consensus on what the common or human good involves in practice. Perhaps one of the best contributions the churches can make to public policy may well be to help improve the quality of the public conversation about the human goods we can achieve together.

I conclude with a prayer written by the late Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil:

‘Why do we fly so low,
When we are borne along by such powerful gusts
as only your Spirit can blow?’