

## Contributing to Australian public policy

**Bruce Duncan**

***Religious institutes have responded very vigorously to the call of the Second Vatican Council to embrace more fully work for social justice and peacemaking.***

Since the Council, our congregations have recognised more robustly how critical to the Gospel is the task of social transformation.

Yet this emphasis on social concerns is relatively new. For many years the Church and religious institutes were forced into a defensive formation, often referred to as the 'ghetto' or 'fortress' Church.

This strategy had many strengths, preserving the faith and encouraging an enormous burst of charitable works, including health care and education, a key way out of social deprivation. The huge growth in religious orders in the 19th century was the means by which all this became possible.

The shadow side of this strategy was the widespread neglect of social reform efforts among Catholics. It comes as a shock to hear England's famous Cardinal Manning, who played such a prominent role in support of Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, lamenting that Catholics took little part in the great reform movements of the time.

Shortly before his death in 1892, Manning wrote of the absence of Catholics from social reform movements. "The abolition of the slave and of slavery, and the persevering protests of the Anti-Slavery Society were cases in point, but, as far as I know, not a Catholic name shared in this ...

"There are endless works for the protection of shop assistants, over-worked railway and tram men, women and children ground down by sweaters, and driven by starvation into the streets. Not one of the works in their behalf was started by us, hardly a Catholic name is to be found in their reports. Surely we are in the Sacristy?"

In contrast with this earlier Catholic culture, the Second Vatican Council insisted mightily on attending to the 'signs of the times' and engaging in the tasks of social transformation as integral to the Gospel message. The social teaching of the Church has grown prodigiously, and recent popes themselves have led the way in re-interpreting the Christian message to include concern for human rights, social justice, peacemaking and preserving the environment.

John Paul II took as the compass of his pontificate the journey to the new Millennium, seen through the Jubilee message of Luke 4, bringing Good News to the poor and release to captives. He spelt out the social implications today, stressing reform of economic systems to ensure greater equity and freedom.

Our religious institutes embraced this renewed vision, emphasising the need to help raise the social conscience of people, and to overcome the dualism in the Church that considered religious concerns as far removed from practical social issues. Without abandoning their charitable works, the religious institutes recognised that to help the poor and needy more effectively today required better government policies.

As we well know, not all has gone well since the Council, and it is not surprising that there has been a conservative reaction to the Council, with efforts to restore an earlier Catholic culture and piety. There has even been an echo of the anti-Modernist campaigns at the beginning of the 20th century.

In addition, some clergy have down-played the significance of social justice as just a 'fad' that will pass. A new clericalism and triumphalism have emerged. In the public forum, some church leaders speak predominantly about sexual or bioethical issues while maintaining almost total silence on wider issues of social equity and justice, the Iraq war and the distribution of wealth. Some extol Church authority above conscience, despite the strong tradition of moral teaching on the pre-eminence of conscience.

In such confusion, the leaders of religious institutes can play a critical role reaffirming Vatican II, and discovering a new relevance in their religious commitment. The vow of poverty, for instance, takes on new meaning in the context of global warming, as a commitment to living frugally and sharing resources equitably.

Religious leaders have also influenced public policy more directly, especially when they articulate the experience of their members, for instance as chaplains in prisons or hospitals, or with indigenous people, or working with refugees or asylum seekers.

In such instances, lobbying can be particularly effective since leaders of institutes have some status. But the personal relationships with politicians or their advisers is also important, and needs to be nourished. I am told that some politicians, even Catholic ones, know little about Catholic social teaching, so we should not presume they understand our tradition of social thought.

Religious leaders indeed have a privileged place in society. We are widely acknowledged as having expertise in human and social values, though we must be aware of the limits of our experience. We need to identify issues where our voice can make a difference, bearing in mind that even small changes in legislation can make a significant difference to the wellbeing of many.

Of course, we must speak with modesty and humility, acknowledging the expertise of others, and not claim an undue authority. If we can advance our views reasonably with a strong sense of compassion, we will find that we have many allies, whether they are Catholic or not, whether they are even religious or not.

Our charism at this moment is perhaps to show a new way of witnessing to the Gospel.

Within the Church, we need to relish forms of spirituality that embrace social transformation and work for justice, integrating this in a renewed sense of intimacy with God as one so passionately concerned about human wellbeing as in Christ to lay down his life, showing how intensely he identifies with those in distress or suffering. This perception of God's solidarity with us can help us forge a new language that connects with people in a more secular age.

As well as developing the skills and involvement of our own members, we especially need to encourage lay activism and expertise. Where are our lay activists, thinkers, writers and commentators? Why do we seem to have so few 'public intellectuals'?

If Cardinal Manning were alive today, he would urge us most vociferously not to retreat back into 'the sacristy, but to do our part in confronting the social evils of our time in collaboration with all concerned about human wellbeing.

*This is a summary of a talk to the Conference of Leaders of Religious Congregations of Victoria, Melbourne, August 13, 2007.*