

Rome and the bush

Bruce Duncan looks at the role of the church following the war in Iraq

IRAQ MAY TECHNICALLY have regained its sovereignty, but what sort of freedom or stability its people might enjoy remains to be seen. The United States, Britain and Australia waged a war to remove the tyrant, Saddam Hussein, but at great cost to their own standing in the international community, to the system of international law, the United Nations and the people of Iraq. Britain and the United States have since been desperately trying to retrieve the moral ground lost during the Iraq war.

At Mr Howard's meeting with him in Washington in early June, President Bush obligingly condemned Mark Latham's intention to withdraw Australian troops by Christmas, but elevated the question of the US alliance and the Iraqi entanglement higher on the electoral scoreboard.

Bush flew straight to Rome to meet Pope John Paul II who had strongly opposed the Iraq war on moral grounds and because of the 'grave unrest in the Middle East' likely to result. He told Bush: 'You are very familiar with the unequivocal position of the Holy See in this regard.' He pointedly reiterated that Iraq must quickly have its sovereignty restored, and the international community, particularly the UN, must be brought in to help return the country to normality. The Vatican was earlier dismayed at the new US unilateralism and its claim to a right of pre-emptive attack. Such actions undermine the system of international governance and the UN, which various popes have long supported as the best means to promote peace, the rule of international law and global economic security.

John Paul also noted that the 'deplorable abuses' of Iraqi prisoners 'have troubled the civic and religious conscience of all, and made more difficult a serene and resolute commitment to shared human values'. Implied in this last phrase is a criticism of the US claim to 'exceptionalism' and to a right to act against international norms of conduct if judged to be in its national interest. John Paul continued that without a commitment to 'shared

human values ... neither war nor terrorism will ever be overcome'.

The Pope highlighted one of the burning issues in the Middle East, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The Vatican is deeply concerned about the hawkish support in the Bush administration for Israel's right-wing politicians. In carefully diplomatic language, the Pope called for 'new negotiations, dictated by a sincere commitment to dialogue.'

MANY AUSTRALIAN CLERGY and laity have been disturbed that their religious leaders did not oppose the drift to war more vigorously, even though a number of bishops did speak early and clearly. In their defence, it must be acknowledged that other key bishops were preoccupied with sorting out the sexual abuse tragedy. In the light of that scandal, it was a difficult time for the churches to try to exercise public leadership. Yet the war was a moral issue of such magnitude that it demanded strong leadership.

The Iraq war has exposed the shallowness in Australia of church efforts to engage with these issues. The establishment of justice and peace commissions or organisations in various parts of the country has attempted to remedy some of these gaps, but despite some exceptional contributions, these agencies are relatively thin and poorly funded, even at the national level.

How can the churches generate networks of concern and forums that gather our many lay specialists to broaden the constituency of informed opinion and contribute more positively to the great debates about public policy?

The churches cannot do this by isolating themselves in narrow intellectual hot-houses, but must encourage lay thinkers and social activists to join the conversation about how to extend the rule of law, peace, human rights and prosperity. It means being present in the universities and media debates and keenly aware of the complexity of socio-economic issues, but also being

alert to the depth of resources available in the Catholic and wider Christian social traditions.

Little can happen along these lines without money. Catholics in particular contribute little financially to the development of their theological and tertiary institutes, as well as the justice and peace agencies. Why do we not have vigorous think-tanks inspired by Christian social activism and thought, and university chairs dedicated to the overarching moral issues of justice, development and the environment? Why have we been so slow in Australia to develop independent lay publications? Why do we not sponsor prizes and scholarships to advance expertise in these areas?

Catholic and Christian thought and activity in Australia is often timid, myopic and parochial, in contrast with the constant activity of the Vatican and other international church agencies wrestling with the burning issues of peace, development and international relations. The Australian churches have had little to say on the wider moral implications of US unilateralism, its expanded military spending, the neglect of the UN Millennium Goals, and the need for a political mobilisation to eradicate global hunger. Is the fact that the US is intending to establish military training facilities in Australia of no moral significance for the churches?

The sexual abuse scandals were a traumatic wake-up call to the churches about the handling of such issues. Australia's involvement in the Iraq war should be a further call that the churches need to lift their game to focus on pressing international moral issues, not least because the churches themselves form one of the most significant international networks in the Pacific and south-east Asia. ■

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