February 2014

The Church and Politics

Richard P. McBrien

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol1/iss1/6

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact lawdr@nd.edu.
THE CHURCH AND POLITICS

REVEREND RICHARD P. McBRIEN*

The relationship between the Church and politics is exceedingly complex. A comprehensive examination of the question would have to embrace theology (both ecclesiology and social ethics), political philosophy and political science, sociology, history, culture, and, of course, law. I am limited by space as well as competence. Therefore, I shall address the problem as a theologian only, and as an ecclesiologist in particular.

When one is speaking of the Church, there are at least three polarities which must be kept in mind. First, the Church is both the whole Body of Christ (Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Oriental) and a particular denomination or community within it. Secondly, the Church is both the whole People of God (laity, religious, and clergy alike) and particular groups within it (e.g., the hierarchy, or the official Church). Thirdly, the Church is both the universal Church and a local church. Indeed, the universal Church is a college of local churches. Each of these six meanings of Church is engaged in this paper. It is hoped that the particular meaning will be clear from the context, if not from the explicit reference.

When one is speaking of politics, there are at least two meanings at issue: the classical and the practical. Politics may refer to the affairs of “the city” (the polis). John Courtney Murray, S.J., insisted that a political community arises from argument and dialogue among its members, especially regarding justice as the ground of that unity which is called peace. “If the public argument dies from disinterest, or subsides into the angry mutterings of polemic, or rises to the shrillness of hysteria, or trails off into positivistic triviality, or gets lost in a morass of semantics,” he declared, “you may be sure that the barbarian is at the gates of the City.”1 A second, more practical meaning of politics links it with the process by which the power to achieve justice and peace is con-

---

* Crowley-O’Brien-Walter Professor and Chairman, Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame.

1. J. MURRAY, America’s Four Conspiracies, in RELIGION IN AMERICA 22 (J. Cogley ed. 1958).

57
ferred and exercised. Again, both meanings are engaged in this paper.

I. THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PROBLEM

The Church/politics relationship is only one of several different kinds. There is, first of all, the fundamental relationship between morality and moral values, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. Then there is the somewhat narrower relationship between religion and politics. Contrary to President Reagan's remarks at the ecumenical prayer breakfast in Dallas in August, religion is not the sole foundation of morality. It is possible to have moral convictions and to behave morally without being religious. Therefore, to say, as he did, that "politics and morality are inseparable," is not necessarily to say that religion and politics are inseparable. Thirdly, there is the relationship between a general category of religious faiths (e.g., Christianity) and politics. Fourthly, there is the relationship between a particular religious faith or tradition (e.g., Catholicism) and politics. Although I am referring throughout this essay to the more general problem of morality and religion, on the one side, and politics, on the other, my principal point of reference is the Catholic Church. But not only are there different kinds of relationships; there are also different modes of relationships. A morally sensitive constituency or a formally religious group could find themselves (1) in opposition to a given state and/or society (e.g., the Bahais in Iran, Christians in Muslim nations, Jews in medieval Spain); (2) in union with a given state and/or society (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Vatican City State); (3) in a condition of separation from the state and/or society (Richard John Neuhaus' notion of The Naked Public Square); or (4) in a relationship characterized by mutuality, in which there is dialogue (involving both criticism and support) and participation (leaving open the questions of how and by whom?). Finally, there are different contexts for these various kinds and modes of relationships. A given state and/or society may be secularistic, theocratic, secular, or pluralistic. Each of these contexts will shape the nature and mode of the relationships.


II. THE OFFICIAL CATHOLIC RESPONSE

Catholicism is not without answers to some of the questions posed by these relationships. Its answers have been formulated at both universal (international) and local (national) levels.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae) affirmed the principle of religious freedom for all, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The council grounded the principle in the dignity of the human person and in the freedom of the act of faith. Coercion of any kind is incompatible with both values.

The council's most detailed teaching on the question of the relationship between the Church and politics is set forth in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes). Complete separation between the two is impossible because the Spirit of God is in everyone. The relationship, however, must be characterized by mutuality, i.e., dialogue and some form of participation. Such mutuality is grounded as always in the twin principles regarding the dignity of the human person and the demands of the common good.

According to Gaudium et Spes, the Church is called to form God's family here on earth and help increase it until the Lord returns. Indeed, the Church is the sacrament (sign and instrument) of this union with God and with one another. It serves as a leaven of this unifying process, i.e., "it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men (and women) with a deeper meaning and importance" (n. 40). The Church's commitment to, and involvement in, this process is rooted in such basic theological principles as the Incarnation (whereby everything and everyone has been "assumed and sanctified"), the Redemption, Creation (which grounds our "rightful autonomy" as creatures), and the promise of the Kingdom of God (when the "splendor" of the human race is "fully revealed" and God will be "all in all").

And yet Christ gave the Church "no proper mission in the political, economic or social order" (n. 42). Nevertheless, the Church has the right and duty to "pass moral judgments


in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it" (n. 76). This is because there are “close links between earthly things and those elements of (our human) condition which transcend the world.” In all this, however, the Church and its pastoral leaders are learners as well as teachers. The Church must learn from history, from science, from culture, and from its own experience. It must take care, too, not to think that we must always agree on the concrete solutions to problems.

Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role. Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may easily be confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church’s authority for his opinion. (n. 43).

The Third International Synod of Bishops’ document Justice in the World (Iustitia in Mundo), promulgated in November 1971, affirmed three significant theses: (1) the mission of the Church (evangelization) includes action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world; (2) such participation is rooted in our universal solidarity under God, the dignity of the human person, and the demands of the common good; and (3) the Church’s own witness to justice is crucial (“While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes”).

Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi), given in December 1975, proposed the same all-inclusive notion of evangelization. There is an “unceasing interplay of the Gospel and . . . (our) concrete life, both personal and social.” Evangelization, therefore, involves an explicit message about human
rights, family life, life in society, international life, peace, justice, and development. It is "a message especially energetic today about liberation" (n. 29).

These four documents are representative of the teachings of the universal Church, but they are only representative. A fuller discussion would require more deliberate attention to such pronouncements as Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971), and Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and *Laborem Exercens* (1981), as well as his important addresses in various countries of the world.

The response of the Catholic Church at the local (national) level has been equally substantive and straightforward. The letter entitled Political Responsibility, issued by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference in March 1984, grounded political involvement in love of neighbor, which goes beyond individual relationships to embrace the entire human community, and in Christ's specific call to reach out and help those in need, which also goes beyond individual relationships to embrace the institutions and structures of society, the economy, and politics. The purpose of such involvement is to promote human rights and to denounce violations of such rights; to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of secular issues; to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm of social and political life; and to point out the demands of Christian faith for a just transformation of society.

But we are not to be involved in the formation of voting blocs nor in the endorsement of candidates and parties. Rather, we are to judge them all on a full range of issues, such as abortion, arms control and disarmament, capital punishment, civil rights, the economy, education, energy, family life, food and agricultural policy, health, housing, human rights, mass media, and regional conflict in the world. "This is not an exclusive listing of the issues that concern us," the bishops concluded.

Then there are the two letters issued by Bishop James Malone, of Youngstown, Ohio, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Writing on behalf of the entire body of bishops in the United States, Bishop Malone noted that it is their task to identify a "framework for moral guidance for use by Catholics and other persons of good will.

---
in making their decisions on political candidates and parties.” Two issues have priority: abortion and nuclear war. The letter, prematurely released on August 9, 1984, focussed more on abortion because it had become, during the summer months of the U.S. presidential campaign, a matter of intense controversy. Abortion, he insisted, is not a religious or a Catholic issue; it is a human rights and a life issue. The letter challenged those (like Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro) who seemed to draw a line between personal morality and public policy. It also suggested, without explanation or argument, that in the case of abortion (and also direct attacks on non-combatants in war) there can be no gap between principle and application. To accept the principle is to leave no room for differences regarding application.

That matter, and others, was clarified in the second letter issued by Bishop Malone on October 13, 1984. In this letter he argued that, while there is a legitimate separation of Church and state, there can be no separation between moral and religious values, on the one side, and public life, on the other. The letter also repeated and reaffirmed points from the March document, Political Responsibility; namely, that we are to take no stands on parties and candidates, that we are to form no voting blocs, that we are not a one-issue Church, that many issues have to be taken into account when voting, and that priority must be given to the prevention of nuclear war and the protection of unborn human life, both of which are matters of public morality.

What was most striking about the second Malone letter was its acknowledgment that we can agree on moral principles and disagree on their application, i.e., “on the most effective legal and policy remedies.” On the other hand, a prudential judgment that political solutions are not now feasible does not justify a failure to undertake the effort. Therefore, while we can debate the best way to apply our moral principles, we cannot debate whether or not we should even try to apply those principles in the political order.

The concession that there can be a legitimate difference of opinion about the political application of moral principles (an argument advanced with some emphasis by Governor Mario M. Cuomo in his address at the University of Notre

Dame, September 13, 1984) was underscored on October 15, only two days after the letter by Bishop Malone, in a major address given by Archbishop John J. O'Connor, of New York. It had been assumed by many Catholics that a failure to support a constitutional ban on all abortions was, in effect, a decision in favor of abortions. Governor Cuomo strongly resisted such an implication, but the charge was hurled at him nonetheless. In his address of October 15, Archbishop O'Connor seemed to move from the preceding assumption to a position closer to that espoused by Father Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame. This is what Archbishop O'Connor said that night:

As Father Hesburgh of Notre Dame has observed: tragically, in essence, we may never again come to an agreement in our land that all abortion should be declared illegal, and some may passionately believe that exception should be made in cases of rape, or incest, or truly grave threat to the actual physical survival of the mother. Whatever we may believe about such exceptions, however, we know that they constitute a fraction of the abortions taking place, so that at the very least we can come to grips with what is the real and the frightening issue of the day: abortion on demand.

But whatever our differences about the proper political strategy to adopt, Bishop Malone urges that the debate be one of “dialogue with reason and civility.”

(Again, these are only samples of significant statements by the U.S. Catholic Bishops. Other national episcopal conferences have also addressed these issues in light of their own situations.)

III. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. Morality and moral values are inescapably relevant to politics insofar as both are concerned with justice and peace i.e., the unity of the human community.

2. Religion, insofar as its values are applicable to public policy debates, is also inescapably relevant to politics. Complete separation is impossible because of the unity between

love of God and love of neighbor, and between human effort and divine action in the coming of the Kingdom of God: a kingdom of justice and peace, and the common destiny of the Church and the world, of which the Church is a part.11

3. The ways in which religion is relevant to politics are diverse: opposition, union, and mutuality (see again section I) are open to various practical expressions.

4. The right of religious groups and their leaders to participate in the political process, however, is undeniable. It is theologically grounded in their duty to defend the dignity of the human person (which is at the heart of the Gospel, according to Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis*) and to promote the common good, i.e., the unity and welfare of the human family.

5. The ways in which religious groups and their leaders can participate are also diverse, but the Catholic Church, at both universal and local levels, discourages partisan political activity, e.g., the formation of voting blocs and the endorsement of parties and candidates.

6. There is a distinction between moral and religious principles, on the one hand, and the application of those principles in the public forum, on the other. We can agree on the principles and disagree on their political application, without necessarily sacrificing our Catholic integrity.

7. The mode of official teaching on matters pertaining to the political order must be characterized by dialogue. We are guided by the example of the process employed in the preparation of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace.*12

8. The most effective way of insuring and strengthening the moral authority of such teaching is through the Church's own witness to it. Before all else, we must practice what we preach.

---