

Catholics and Political Life in the United States

Considerations about the “Doctrinal note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life”

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Introduction

There is a story about a priest who would encourage one of his parishioners to live Christian generosity, asking him, “If he had two houses, would you share the house with one needy person?” “Of course I would, Father”, was the answer. “And what if you had two horses? Would you share one with someone who didn’t have one?” “Yes, Father”. “And what if you had two plantation fields, would you share one with someone who doesn’t have one?” “Yes, Father” ... and the questions continued, always followed by a positive answer. When the priest asked: “And what if you had two shirts, would you share one with someone who doesn’t have one?” “Oh, NO, Father, I wouldn’t do it”. “And why not?” asked the priest surprised. “Because I DO have two shirts.”

Some politicians, who call themselves Catholic, unfortunately are like the parishioner in the story. They are willing to do “anything” for the Church as long as it doesn’t relate to or affect them.

And precisely because of this problem it was opportune, especially in the last few years, to have the document “Doctrinal note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life” published.

The note itself is very clear, and I don’t think I can give more light than the document itself. I do believe, however, that it is worth to make some comments from the perspective of the United States.

In fact, the theme of Catholic identity and the practical party politics has raised a very intense debate within the Church in the United States; and many American politicians who consider themselves Catholic have complained about the “injustice” with which they have been treated when they were reminded that they should not receive communion if their actions in political life were at odds with fundamental teachings of the Church. Some of them, have given as an

example of the alleged “discrimination” they suffer, the politicians in Latin America or Europe who disagree with church teachings and still receive communion.

The core of the doctrinal note

The doctrinal note dated November 24, 2002 is very explicit. But I’ve taken eight concepts which I consider central. I will read them almost verbatim from the original document:

“A kind of cultural relativism exists today, evident in the conceptualization and defense of an ethical pluralism, which sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principles of the natural moral law.”.

- “It is, however, the Church’s right and duty to provide a moral judgment on temporal matters when this is required by faith or the moral law.”

- A correct understanding of the human *person* implies that “Catholic involvement in political life cannot compromise on this principle, for otherwise the witness of the Christian faith in the world, as well as the unity and interior coherence of the faithful, would be non-existent.”

- “A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good.”

- There are “moral principles that do not admit of exception, compromise or derogation” “This is the case with laws concerning *abortion* and *euthanasia*.”

- “In the same way, it is necessary to recall the duty to respect and protect the rights of the *human embryo*. Analogously, the *family* needs to be safeguarded and promoted, based on monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, and protected in its unity and stability in the face of modern laws on divorce.”

- “This is not a question of «confessional values» *per se*, because such ethical precepts are rooted in human nature itself and belong to the natural moral law.”

- “The principles contained in the present Note are intended to shed light on one of the most important aspects of the unity of Christian life: coherence between faith and life, Gospel and culture, as recalled by the Second Vatican Council.”

The Note and the American case

Unlike Mexico or other countries, in the United States, Catholics have been historically perceived as foreigners and suspicious. Catholics in the USA, throughout the years, struggle to be part of society, trying to “fit in” as Americans.

As time went by, this goal was reached; but many brother Bishops and Catholic thinkers ask themselves if we haven’t paid too high a price: the price of identity. Currently, about 70% of the politicians who call themselves Catholic in Congress and at the Senate support abortion; and the number grows to almost 90% in States with traditional Catholic presence such as Massachusetts and New York.

The majority of these Catholic politicians have fallen into a distorted interpretation of the so-called principle of the “*seamless garment*” as stated some years ago by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin from Chicago.

Cardinal Bernardin would say, not without reason, that the Catholic social doctrine was a “seamless garment”. That means that some issues could not be separated from others, because all are connected to each other within the Catholic doctrine.

The correct interpretation of this doctrine, of course, is what we all know: that the Social Doctrine of the Church “belongs to the field of theology and particularly of moral theology.” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41). Thus, the many topics of this doctrine are united to each other by the common principles they share. This affirmation, however, must include the fact that in moral law there are many issues and the gravity of each one of them is not equal for all of them.

Many Catholic politicians, however, inspired by some influential theologians’ interpretation, have applied the principle of the “seamless garment” in this way: the doctrine of the church is a whole, where everything has the same value. Therefore, if I believe “most” of the doctrine, especially in the social area, I can honestly disagree with matters such as abortion, euthanasia or homosexual unions, because by following “most” of it, I am following the whole, which is inseparable.

This interpretation has led to very peculiar anomalies such as the “catholicity” survey held by a Catholic Senator, among his colleagues. The results conclude that he and another famous Senator were the “most Catholic ones” of the Senate... despite the fact that both of them had a record of 100% of voting in favor of abortion, euthanasia, homosexual unions and the experimentation with embryonic stem cells.

At the time of the publication of this doctrinal note in January 2003, the American press asked the opinion of many of these politicians. Almost all of them responded in the same way: we respect the opinion of the Vatican, but here we live in a democracy, where we can disagree. And since we can disagree, we disagree with the Vatican, and that does not mean we are less devout Catholics. Once more, the vicious application of the “seamless garment” principle.

The conflict in the last elections

This debate stopped being an abstraction when in the last presidential election one of the candidates was a Catholic, who calls himself devout, and who has, however, defended the most radical positions in favor of abortion.

Some groups with political agendas, but also many confused Catholics went to the bishops seeking orientation, especially after Senator Kerry attended Mass and received communion in a Mass that was televised as part of his political campaign.

The issue was discussed so much by Catholics among themselves, that it was necessary to give it an unplanned space in the bishops meeting in June of 2004, which was held in Denver, Colorado, when I was the auxiliary bishop there, and therefore, co-host.

In that occasion, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, sent a letter called "Worthiness to receive Holy Communion. General Principles", to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington, with the intention of shedding light on the dialogue of the bishops.

The letter had four fundamental topics which I will mention almost verbatim from the original document:

- "The Church teaches that abortion or euthanasia is a grave sin... Christians have a 'grave obligation of conscience not to cooperate formally in practices which, even if permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to God's law.' ... This cooperation can never be justified either by invoking respect for the freedom of others or by appealing to the fact that civil law permits it or requires it".

- Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion... There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia."

- "Regarding the grave sin of abortion or euthanasia, when a person's formal cooperation becomes manifest (understood, in the case of a Catholic politician, as his consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion and euthanasia laws), his Pastor should meet with him, instructing him about the Church's teaching, informing him that he is not to present himself for Holy Communion until he brings to an end the objective situation of sin, and warning him that he will otherwise be denied the Eucharist.

- "When 'these precautionary measures have not had their effect or in which they were not possible,' and the person in question, with obstinate persistence, still

presents himself to receive the Holy Eucharist, 'the minister of Holy Communion must refuse to distribute it'... This decision, properly speaking, is not a sanction or a penalty. Nor is the minister of Holy Communion passing judgment on the person's subjective guilt, but rather is reacting to the person's public unworthiness to receive Holy Communion due to an objective situation of sin."

With approximately 300 bishops, it is not always easy to reach an agreement about such controversial topics within the American episcopate. The bishops, however, reached a fairly consistent agreement, which was reflected in a document called "Catholics in Political Life".

This document offered the following points:

- "It is the teaching of the Catholic Church from the very beginning, founded on her understanding of her Lord's own witness to the sacredness of human life, that the killing of an unborn child is always intrinsically evil and can never be justified."
- "To make such intrinsically evil actions legal is itself wrong. This is the point most recently highlighted in official Catholic teaching."
- "We need to do more to **persuade** all people that human life is precious and human dignity must be defended. This requires more effective dialogue and engagement with all public officials, especially Catholic public officials."
- "The Eucharist is the source and summit of Catholic life... This means that all must examine their consciences as to their worthiness to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord. This examination includes fidelity to the moral teaching of the Church in personal and public life."
- "The question has been raised as to whether the denial of Holy Communion to some Catholics in political life is necessary because of their public support for abortion on demand. Given the wide range of circumstances involved in arriving at a prudential judgment on a matter of this seriousness, we recognize that such decisions rest with the individual bishop in accord with the established canonical and pastoral principles."

Some lessons

Beyond the controversies that generated many tensions, and which made evident that many more Catholics are more willing to follow their own opinion than to listen to the bishops, the challenge of having a pro abortion Catholic as a candidate was an unexpected occasion to catechize deeply about two fundamental topics: Catholic identity and the value of the Eucharist.

I believe there are four important lessons of universal value that flow from what happened and from what is still happening around these topics:

1) *The need to establish that the Church and the faithful not only can, but must speak up about these topics, and they must do so without betraying their identity.*

We need to reject the idea that the participation of Catholics is a way of “imposing our religious ideas on others”, a common accusation among those who want to silence the voice of the Church from the public arena.

As the doctrinal note shows very well, the participation of Catholics in these matters comes from a judgment of common sense, not a dogmatic judgment.

Catholics believe that not attending Mass on Sundays without a grave reason is a sin; however, we do not intend that the police should take Catholics who don't go to Mass to jail. That would be to impose our religious principles on society. And that is something we do not intend and have never intended to do. We simply want society to listen to the voice of the Church when she speaks based on common sense in favor of the human person; and that lay Catholics may be the main bearers of this good news.

Borrowing the words from my friend, Archbishop Charles Chaput, from Denver, “if it quacks like a duck, looks like a duck and walks like a duck, it is probably a duck. A fox can repeat over and over again that he is a duck. But he is still a fox.”

That means, a Catholic cannot say that he is Catholic, and at the same time disagree with the doctrine of the Church in essential matters. In order to be a Catholic, we need to believe like a Catholic, to act like a Catholic and to speak like a Catholic.

Regarding this same issue, the Second Vatican Council must be the most praised and the least understood gathering in the history of the Catholic Church, referring to candidates and voters.

Some Catholics who appeal to the “Spirit of Vatican II” and claim that they are listening to their consciences when they reject the Catholic teaching in the critical topics of public life, should go back and review what the council really said.

The Pastoral Constitution about the Church in Today's World, *Gaudium et spes*, defines conscience as "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor" (16).

The council continues: "In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality" (16).

Vatican II can never be used as an alibi for Catholics who do not pay attention to the grave public evil caused, or who cannot act according to their faith in the political realm. This is a distortion of the message of the Council.

2) *The urgency not to isolate topics related to life and family from the issue of human dignity.*

I've seen that the media in some parts of Latin America have separated topics like abortion, euthanasia, homosexual unions from topics related to human rights, and in general, to human dignity.

In countries like Chile or Argentina, for instance, they are called "valoric topics", something that to me sounds like "caloric", as if they were part of a diet.

In the document "Living the Gospel of Life", an interesting document from the American bishops from November 18, 1998, we read that: "We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others."

The document calls all Catholics of the USA, "especially those in positions of leadership -- whether cultural, economic or political -- to recover their identity as followers of Jesus Christ and to be leaders in the renewal of American respect for the sanctity of life... No one, least of all someone who exercises leadership in society, can rightfully claim to share fully and practically the Catholic faith and yet act publicly in a way contrary to that faith."

The document explains also that: "it is not possible to build the common good without recognizing and defending the right to life upon which all other inalienable human rights are founded and developed."

This approach is essential, especially for the challenges we face in our society: the defense of life and family is not only part of but the foundation of the respect to the dignity of the human person. Only by defending life and its natural and immediate environment – the family – we can be truly defenders of man’s rights, true fighters for justice, equity and solidarity.

3) The need to develop an appropriate catechesis, especially among politicians who call themselves Catholic

One of the things that has become more evident in the debate about the Catholic identity of politicians is the grave ignorance that exists about the doctrine of the Church. And I don’t refer only to superficial misperceptions, but to deeper issues, such as claiming that someone is a good Catholic because he agrees with the Pope’s criticism about the war in Iraq, supposing that this issue has the same moral value as that of abortion. This is something which we not only know is not correct, but that Cardinal Ratzinger himself made clear in the already mentioned note sent to Cardinal McCarrick.

It is important to remind candidates who call themselves Catholic but who publicly ignore the Catholic teachings regarding the holiness of human life, that in so doing, they give a disingenuous public witness.

4) The importance of establishing a common policy among bishops according to the Holy See’s request.

The unity of the episcopate in a country is a great value that strengthens the unity of the Church. Despite natural differences, from which not even the Apostles were free, we, bishops, must give a unified vision before the varied challenges placed before us by the political, social and cultural realms of society.

The issue of the Catholic identity and the reception of communion for public figures are not going to diminish, but to increase. So we must make sure that we share a common and unified pastoral policy.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus said that “Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of men, for whom his every word and every revelation exists” (LH 2nd Reading Feast Baptism of the Lord)

It is clear to all of us that the purpose of the doctrinal note and the statement of the U.S. bishops is no other than that the pastoral concern for souls. It is not to condemn people but to guide them to salvation in charity and truth.

I would like to finish by sharing – and praying with you – the conclusive prayer of the document “Living the Gospel of Life”:

Mary, patroness of America, renew in us a love for the beauty and sanctity of the human person from conception to natural death; and as your Son gave His life for us, help us to live our lives serving others. Mother of the Church, Mother of our Savior, open our hearts to the Gospel of life, protect our nation, and make us witnesses to the truth.