

Santa Clara University

Teachers, Catholicism, and American Politics

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What Is Our Hope?

- “We can be fully Catholic; proudly, totally at ease with ourselves, a people in the world, transforming it, a light to this nation. Appealing to the best in our people, not the worst. Persuading not coercing. Leading people to truth by love. And still, all the while, respecting and enjoying our unique pluralistic democracy.”

-- Mario Cuomo

-- Former Governor of New York

-- From Speech at University of
Notre Dame in 1984

Politics and the Vocation of the Teacher

- What is the vocation of a Catholic school teacher in the present-day context of Catholicism and American politics?
- To know and pass on Catholic teaching and fundamental moral principles and values like human dignity and the common good
- But also to set such principles and values in the broader context of virtues like prudence and of the stories and images
- The Catholic Church in the US – from bishops to parishes – has engaged American politics too much in terms of uncompromising principles and not enough in terms of the virtues and of stories and images
- Teachers today have tremendous impact on the politics of tomorrow: Shaping disciples who can persuade their fellow citizens!

What is Going On?

- After Roe v. Wade in 1973, Catholic Church leadership at odds with many politicians over legal right to abortion
- Famous disputes in mid-1980s between Cardinal John O'Connor and Catholics like Mario Cuomo and Geraldine Ferraro
- In 2004 election, several American Catholic bishops said Communion should be refused to a Catholic politician who supports the legal right to abortion
- American Catholic citizens have not closely tracked positions taken by Catholic bishops
- American Catholic vote is reliably up for grabs – neither staunchly Democratic nor Republican
- Many Catholics in political office

Catholic Values and Political Life

- The Overarching Values: Human Dignity and the Common Good
- Often we invoke these values without explaining them. Try to do so here.
- The Catholic “AND”: dignity and the common good, individual and community, private property and common good, etc.
- Values that fulfill dignity and the common good: human life; call to family and community; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor; the dignity of work; solidarity; and care for creation

Catholic Values, ctd.

- Human Dignity: Each person made in the image and likeness of the Trinity
- Thus each person made for community analogous to the community of the Trinity
- Thus each person made for diversity analogous to the diversity of the Trinity
- Human Dignity as gift AND task
- Human Dignity as gift: God loved us into being, redeemed us in Jesus Christ
- Human Dignity as gift: Dignity can never be lost
- Human Dignity as gift: Demands from others a love that is unconditional, that is not based on how someone has made or unmade themselves

Catholic Values, ctd.

- Human Dignity as Task: We can never lose dignity AND we must achieve it
- Human Dignity as Task: Dignity as the ethical demand that each person is responsible for whom they become
- Human Dignity as Task: Dignity as the ethical demand that each person acts by own counsel and purpose, not moved by coercion but by internal motives
- Human Dignity as Task: Each person is responsible AND such responsibility cannot be exercised apart from many social factors
- Human Dignity: The image of Nelson Mandela walking out of prison with his fist upraised!

Catholic Values, ctd.

- Common Good: Sum total of all the social conditions that affect the fulfillment of persons
- Common Good: The great good of the preservation of the unity called peace
- Common Good: Solidarity is the virtue committed to the care of the common good
- Common Good: Upheld by the defense of basic human rights
- Common Good: What are those things that make life together possible at all?
- Common Good: Infrastructure, education, police, fire, water, military, etc.

Catholic Values, ctd.

- Common Good: For the Catholic citizen, the common good does not stop at the front gate or at the national border
- Common Good: For the Catholic citizen, the common good includes the created goods of the non-human world
- Common Good: The image of the Eucharistic Table: Everyone has a place!

Principles, Prudence, and Civil Law

- “An aggressively annoying new phrase in America’s political lexicon is ‘values voters’....This phrase diminishes our understanding of politics...because it implies that only social conservatives vote to advance their values and everyone else votes to...well, it is unclear what they supposedly think they are doing with their ballots”
 - Columnist George Will
 - “Who Isn’t a Values Voter?”
 - May 16, 2006

Principles, Prudence, and Civil Law

- Two Catholic political and legal traditions: Unity of the traditions but a choice of emphasis possible
- First tradition says civil law must closely reflect moral values and moral principles
- This is usual approach of Catholic Church to American politics. From this perspective, permissive civil laws today on things like abortion and gay marriage reflect and contribute to a steep decline in moral character
- In this tradition, civil law is meant to teach and form virtuous citizens
- In this tradition, the task of the Church is to teach consciences with respect to key values and principles relevant to political life: In our conscience we recognize the truth of the moral law
- Our political choices are seen as an exercise of conscience: The civil laws that we uphold should conform to the moral law that we recognize
- This tradition elevates moral principles far above prudential judgment

Prudence, Values, and Civil Law, ctd.

- The unified Catholic legal and political tradition sees civil law as reflective of the moral order AND as a rightful product of political prudence on the part of politicians and citizens oriented to social unity and as a measure of reason, force, and fear
- This tradition sees politics as not primarily the sphere where we uphold moral goodness but as the sphere where we uphold the specifically political good
- This tradition sees law and policy as never only a matter of recognizing in conscience a moral principle but also of highly specific and prudential considerations of circumstances
- Political prudence requires such considerations as: Is a law properly coercive? Is a law enforceable? Does a law promote social unity?
- This tradition lends itself far more to conversation and debate about the whole range of the good that the political community is to do.
- This tradition also accords greater freedom to judgment of citizens and politicians: The realm of “conscience” is not as binding as the realm of “prudence”
- This tradition risks failing to take a stand when a moral law must not be compromised.

Politics and the Vocation of the Teacher II

- Teachers Are Not Bishops Nor Politicians!
- Teachers Should Feel Creative in Approaching Often-Invoked Values Like Human Dignity and the Common Good
- Teachers Should Feel Free in the Classroom to Shape Students Who Grasp Principles and Who Exercise Prudence
- Teachers Have the Noble and Great Political Responsibility to Shape Students Who Will “lead people to truth by love”

Conclusion

“My own judgment on this question is that the appeal to law, whether the matter be race or abortion, must follow the cultural consensus rather than leading or forming it. This does not at all mean that I accept the skepticism and sullen tolerance that has such a strong grip on the public philosophy and culture of the United States today. With the Pope [John Paul II], I think this cultural mentality is deadly. It does mean that I hope that the route of education and persuasion is more likely to improve the moral quality of our culture than is the premature reach for law, which remains coercive even when it intends to be educative. The wariness of so many Americans today is, I think, only likely to be intensified when the arm of the state enters the scene on matters about which they experience uncertainty.”

-- Jesuit Theologian David Hollenbach