

RULE IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

The Pope's Latest Doctrinal Note Can Bridge the Troubled Waters of the Church-State Divide, suggests Frank Brennan

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Speaking against terrorism and religious fundamentalism a year ago, Pope John Paul II said, "Even when the truth has been reached—and this can happen only in a limited and imperfect way—it can never be imposed. To try to impose on others by violent means what we consider to be the truth is an offence against human dignity." In a democracy like Australia, we still confront two difficult questions: what is the role of church leaders in the political process, proclaiming the truth from their religious perspective, when that perspective is not necessarily shared by the majority? And when should politicians vote for a law or social policy according to their religious convictions rather than according to the policy of their party or according to the opinion of the majority whom they represent?

These questions most often arise when Catholic bishops or Catholic politicians start talking about abortion, euthanasia or stem cell research. But they also arise when community leaders and politicians of all faiths and none buy into the question of tax reform and wealth redistribution, or ponder the morality of going to war, or wrestle with the right balance between border security and the dignity of asylum seekers.

The Vatican has now produced a "doctrinal note" setting out "certain fundamental principles proper to the Christian conscience which must govern and inform social and political involvement". Australia's own Archbishop Pell is fond of saying "Catholics should stop talking about the primacy of conscience". This document from Cardinal Ratzinger mentions conscience 15 times, conceding that "It is not the church's task to set forth specific political solutions - and even less to propose a single solution as the acceptable one - to temporal questions". The document sees the formed and informed conscience of the politician and church leader as critical for getting at the truth. A century ago, the Catholic Church was opposed to all forms of liberalism and very suspicious of democracy. Now even its critics would accept that the church is a leader in espousing the cause of democracy. However it still clings to the primacy of truth rather than the primacy of majority opinion.

The document refreshingly proclaims, "Living and acting in conformity with one's own conscience on questions of politics is not slavish acceptance of positions alien to politics or some kind of confessionalism, but rather the way in which Christians offer their concrete contribution, so that, through political life, society will become more just and more consistent with the dignity of the human person". This is good news for tolerant, liberal citizens living in a democracy, regardless of their religious beliefs. There are still many of the old tensions which some religious believers, especially more conservative Catholics, encounter living in a society where their comprehensive view of the good and the true is not shared by the majority of their fellow citizens.

If I believe something is wrong, I would not do it, or if I did, I would regard myself as being in error. I would not commend this action to another person for whom I care. But does this necessarily mean that I would campaign for a law or social policy banning this practice, even invoking criminal sanctions of the state against others who would freely choose to do this thing? Cardinal Ratzinger is understandably concerned about those who "yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends, as if every possible outlook on life were of equal value". Not all outlooks on life are equal. But in a democracy where the dignity of each citizen is respected, the different outlooks on life are equally deserving of guaranteed non-interference and non-discriminatory agnosticism by the state, provided those enacting their outlooks on life do not interfere with the basic rights and dignity of others.

The Vatican Congregation says that political freedom cannot be "based upon the relativistic idea that all conceptions of the human person's good have the same truth and value". That is not to deny that political freedom in a diverse, tolerant democracy must be based on the idea that all conceptions of the good are entitled to an equal hearing before the bar of reason and public opinion when our lawmakers determine the law applicable to all citizens. For example, being a Catholic priest seeking to form and inform my conscience, I readily agree with the Vatican Congregation asserting that "the family needs to be safeguarded and promoted". When it comes to the operation of the law rather than personal preference or moral encouragement at church, I do not see that it necessarily follows that "in no way can other forms of cohabitation be placed on the same level as marriage, nor can they receive legal recognition as such." What about the need to protect the dignity and rights of children born of a de facto union? If I were a lawmaker, being guided by some of the more helpful insights of this document, I could in good and informed conscience vote for a legal measure recognising the legal effects and benefits of de facto relationships while at the same time personally encouraging people to consider matrimony.

In the democratic spirit of the age, this Vatican note is authoritative as an invitation to discussion rather than an edict on faith and morals. It does not provide any politician, judge or administrator with the answers to the moral quandaries they confront in the faithful discharge of their public office. But it does provide useful guideposts for the decision maker wanting to govern in good conscience being true to her office, to her people and to her God.

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